Trail Ride Nation: Zydeco Music & Creole Entanglements in Southwest Louisiana



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Abstract

This doctoral thesis brings into focus the connections between humans, non-humans and zydeco at trail rides in Southwest Louisiana and Eastern Texas. Creole trail rides have become spirited social occasions centered around horses, food, music and dancing. The transient, mobile nature of trail rides offers a unique opportunity to consider the power of human-nonhuman entanglements and their impact on social becoming and collective solidarity. I explore how the region's 'Trail Ride Nation' has emerged from and is sustained by its human participants' specific relationships with horses, sound, clothing and food. I ask: How can we understand human becoming, specifically 'trail rider' becoming, as an entanglement with non-human animals and materialities? Mindful of the complex racial history in Louisiana, I also address how these entangled relationships connect to understandings of 'creolization' as a process of 'creation, invention, critique, and resistance' (Cohen and Toninato 2010: 14), and I ask how can they can become tools for self-making and reinvention against the region's historical backdrop of racial segregation and systems of exclusion. This thesis explores how encounters with non-humans can encourage communal action and what kind of common world emerges by way of sonic, sartorial and edible engagements. I aim to present an argument that the cultural identity and collective belonging that marks what it is to be a trail rider is constituted by these changing and dynamic relationships.

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Introduction

> ‘When you hear someone say “Trail Ride Nation”, that’s like saying, “Hey, all my people mount up! I’m calling everybody.” This is everybody. If you got any inkling to this country life, this is for you. It’s a whole, it’s not a piece of the pie, you get the whole sweet potato pie’[1]
>
> Queliquia Darden, 2019

It is 2015 and a humid Sunday deep in the countryside of St. Landry Parish, Louisiana. The sun is lost behind a blanket of thick cloud and my clothes are beginning to stick to my damp skin. The buzz of cicadas provides a steady soundtrack to an otherwise quiet landscape. In the near distance an expanse of crawfish ponds stretch out to meet a flat horizon, punctuated only by a cluster of rice silos. Apart from a deserted barn and a clapped-out truck, the field I’m standing in is empty. I wonder if I’ve followed Bird’s directions correctly. I found Bird’s number online, and we’d spoken only briefly on the phone. It’s barely 11am and already stiflingly hot. Just as I contemplate giving up, the rumble of an engine gives way to the arrival of a shiny pickup truck towing a battered horse-box. One pick-up becomes thirty and soon the muddy field is full. Families of all ages spill out and greet each other warmly. Horses are saddled up, beers are cracked open and the atmosphere is one of relaxed conviviality. Many of the riders are sporting brightly coloured t-shirts with monikers such as Steady Steppin Riders, Barn Yard Posse, Hip hop Ghetto Riders splashed across the front and back. In a short space of time the hiss and smoke of BBQ already laces the air and mingles with the smell of gasoline and manure.

As the lively scene unfolds I pick my way through the trucks and horses to an open-sided barn where I find Bird arranging the bar. Bird is a bear of a man sporting a hooded sweater and baseball cap perched to one side. He steps forward, grinning broadly to reveal a shiny gold tooth and firmly shakes my hand. “Welcome to West Side Riders, Miss England,” he says, summoning my nickname

[1] Queliquia Darden, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019

for the day. Out in the field the steady thump of bass overlaid with choppy accordion begins to throb from a hefty sound system precariously ratchet-strapped to a trailer. 'Riders mount up!' a voice calls across the thrum of the music and activity. The procession prepares to set out.

THE ZYDECO TRAIL RIDE: AN ENTANGLED NETWORK

Zydeco is the country music of South Louisiana. Played predominantly on accordion and scrub-board, it is a snappy dance music rooted in the Black Creole communities of the region, where descendants of French and Creole-speaking African-Americans (who today still call themselves Creoles) merged their traditional folk songs with accordion and later added rhythm and blues. Throughout zydeco's evolution, the accordion has remained a hallmark along with the corrugated scrub-board, or *frottoir*, which gives zydeco its unmistakable syncopated rhythm. Zydeco is part of a complex, vibrant, multispecies world. A distinctive feature of the scene is the practise of 'trail riding' which sees Creole families meet to collectively ride out on horseback into the countryside for a celebratory day of eating, drinking and dancing to zydeco music. The rides are always accompanied by a DJ and any number of mobile sound systems, often precariously ratchet-strapped to a tractor or a flatbed trailer. For those without horses, there are party wagons and pickup trucks to ensure everyone can take part. Trail rides culminate back at the starting point with a live performance from some of the hottest names in zydeco playing the trail ride circuit.

What started as low key rural get-togethers for close groups of friends and family, zydeco trail rides have evolved into large-scale events with a committed following.[2] The events are run by a tight network of trail ride groups (much like social clubs) going by such names as *Hip Hop Ghetto Riders, Exclusive Outlaws, Steady Steppin Riders, Blinged Out Riders, Rude Boyz Riders.* Each of these groups have their own shirts, insignia and membership. In 2019, Southwest Louisiana's umbrella

[2] The exact origins of trail riding remain unclear but from conversations with participants, three likely and overlapping roots emerge. Some say they began as a family activity, riding out after church on a Sunday, others say they evolved from social outings amongst neighbouring farming families in an era 'where horses were used for transportation and everyday life on the farm' (Giancarlo 2017: 165) and others have linked them to the historic cattle drives on the region (this is discussed further in Chapter 1).

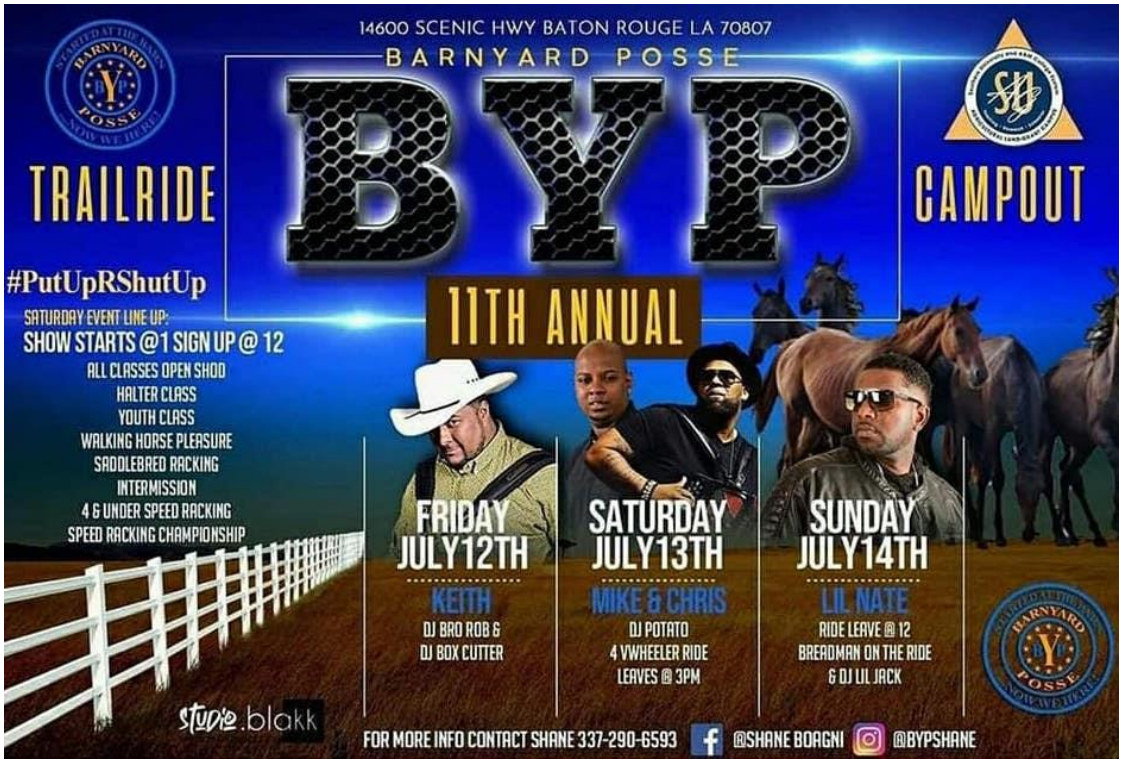


Figure 0.1 A flyer for the BYP annual trail ride boasting three nights of live zydeco entertainment and DJs. Source: Courtesy of Barn Yard Posse 2019

organisation 'Rainbow Trail Ride Association' had twenty-seven associated trail ride groups, each hosting an annual ride that year. Including groups based slightly further afield, there are enough to ensure there is a trail ride taking place almost every weekend of the year somewhere along the 300km I-10 corridor between Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Beaumont, Texas. The trail rides remain not only a social lynchpin for their participants but are also at the heart of local zydeco culture.

'Trail Ride Nation', as it is collectively known, is made up of a close web of dedicated participants but has no specific geographical home. It is a mobile network carried on the backs of horses, wagons, pickup trucks and borne along to the rhythms and syncopations of zydeco music. It spills onto country roads, across expansive fields and into barn venues from Southwest Louisiana to Eastern Texas and, increasingly, to neighbouring states such as Mississippi and Arkansas. Online posts about forthcoming trail rides ring out on social media like a rallying cry, 'Trail Ride Nation mount up!' they'll begin, before detailing the wheres and whens of the event. With their weekly regularity, and participants driving across state lines on a regular basis to attend, trail riding has

become a social lynchpin adding a rhythmic framework and routine to the lives of its human and non-human participants. Summed up by a trail rider when asked to describe a trail ride to someone who had no prior experience:

> I would tell them it's like meeting up with your favourite cousins, hearing some of your favourite music and dancing the night away, in relation to the zydeco side. It's a moving party on the road, on the trail, when we get on these horses, when we get on these wagons. It's animals, it's music, it's food, it's fellowship and fun.[3]

As demonstrated by the above quote, trail rides are a tangled mass of relations, a place where the lives of humans, other species and non-human things biologically and culturally intersect. This doctoral thesis brings into focus the connections between humans, non-humans and zydeco at trail rides in Southwest Louisiana and Eastern Texas. The transient, mobile nature of trail rides offers a unique opportunity to consider the power of human-nonhuman entanglements and their impact on social becoming and collective solidarity. I explore how the region's 'Trail Ride Nation' has emerged from and is sustained by its human participants' specific relationships with horses, sound, clothing and food. I ask: How can we understand human becoming, specifically 'trail rider' becoming, as an entanglement with non-human animals and materialities? Unpacking the lived, embodied, and emotional experiences of the trail ride through the lens of these entangled relationships, I also demonstrate how they are reinscribed, subverted and celebrated through zydeco music. Mindful of the complex racial history in South Louisiana, I consider how such entanglements connect to understandings of 'creolization' as a process of 'creation, invention, critique, and resistance' (Cohen and Toninato 2010: 14), and I ask how can they can become tools for self-making and reinvention against the region's historical backdrop of racial segregation and systems of exclusion. I aim to present an argument that the cultural identity and collective belonging that marks what it is to be a trail rider is constituted by these changing and dynamic relationships.

[3] Ashley Lewis, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019

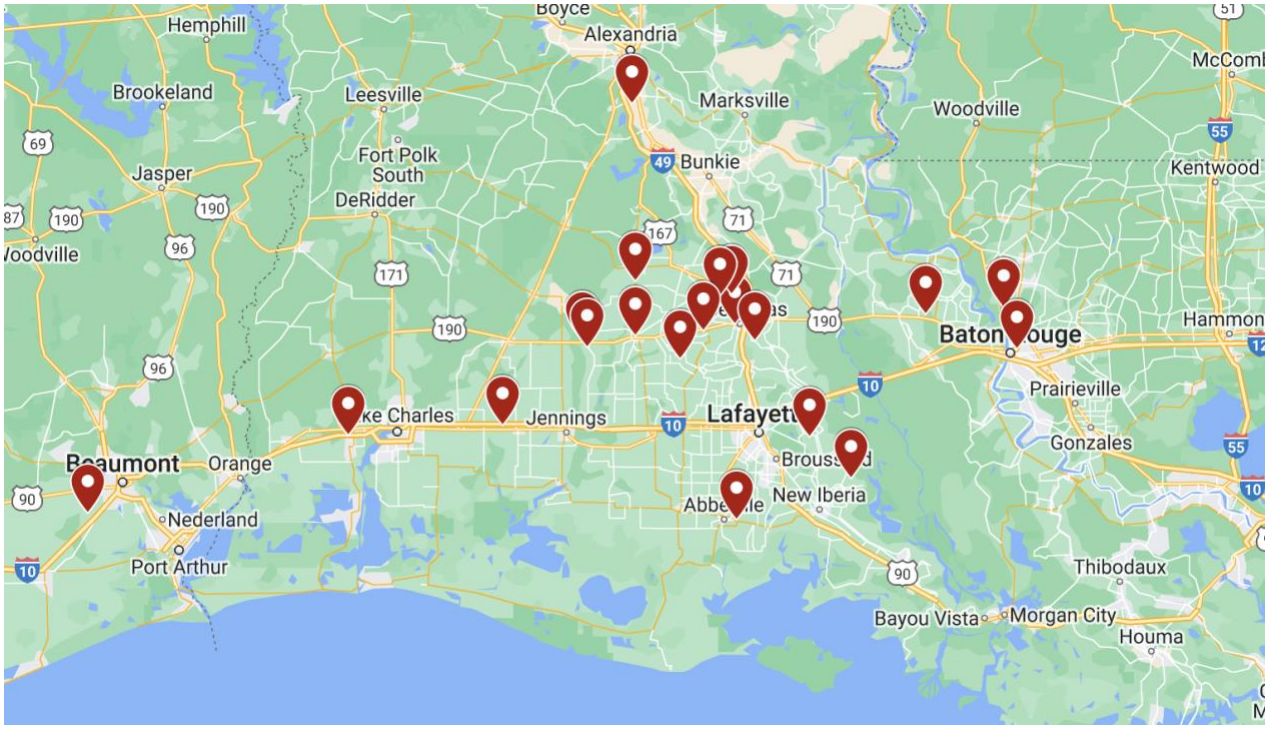


Figure 0.2 A map of regular trail ride locations in Southwest Louisiana and Southeastern Texas.

With strong throughlines of music, race and creolization, each chapter offers a lens into a different human/non-human relationship in the trail ride setting – from the equine to the sonic, the sartorial to the edible. In the words of Brandon LaBelle, the making of a community can be 'a deeply creative and resonant thing' (n.d.). I consider how these specific material relationships in the trail ride setting transform the single body into a collective. I'm interested in how encounters with non-humans can encourage communal action and what kind of common world emerges by way of sonic, sartorial and edible engagements. I use terms like 'assemblage' and 'entanglement' to capture the complexity and materiality of these relationships and highlight why they matter to the trail riders involved. Theorists rooting the process of creolization and the emergence of Creole cultural forms in a specific 'New World' experience (Price 2017; Mintz 1992; Sheller 2003) are key for my conceptual framework, along with those pointing to the deceptive dichotomy of nature/culture (Haraway 2003; Latour 1996; Tsing 2015) and 'vital materiality' or 'thing power' (Bennett 2010). These modes of thought offer a way of conceptualising the trail ride as a complex and changing assemblage of relations that places the human body within 'a field of life forces from which alliances, conflicts, interminglings, and

contaminations are continually at play, from body to body, species to species, thing to thing' (LaBelle 2018: 61).

The practise of weekly trail riding creates joyful experiences in some of Louisiana's most struggling parishes – St Landry, Evangeline, Vermillion amongst others – parishes marked by high poverty statistics and deteriorating buildings (see Figure 0.2 for a map of trail ride locations). Despite the activity's rich cultural heritage and its ongoing function as the backbone of a community, its future in certain parts of Louisiana remains uncertain. Tighter security regulations and rising permit costs are pricing out many groups, whilst some parish councils have banned trail rides altogether. Through relationships with horses, sound, clothing and food, this thesis positions zydeco trail riding as a form of agency, an ethic of community building, a practise of group-care, a site of racialization and a mode of decolonizing. In short, I follow Ogden, Hall and Tanita's call urging scholars to 'understand the world as materially real, partially knowable, multicultural and multinatural, magical and emergent through the contingent relations of multiple beings and entities' (2013: 6).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Louisiana is a state of contradictions. It is a landscape abundant with migratory birds and lush swamplands but with a backdrop of toxic petroleum production. It is state of celebratory open-mindedness coupled with staunch conservatism. It is a place of 'firm racial divides and enthusiastic racial mixing' and a state of 'poverty that can be measured by statistics and an extraordinary wealth of festivity and memory that cannot be quantified' (Snedeker and Solnit 2013: 4). According to Louisiana Travel (2022), Louisiana has over four hundred festivals a year inspired by the region's music, food, and history and that's before you count the weekly trail rides that sprawl along backcountry lanes of the Southwestern parishes. In order to bring readers into the fold of this multi-species musical phenomenon, it is vital to outline the specific geographical, economic and racial context of trail riding's emergence. This review of the relevant literature begins by discussing the historical origins of the term 'creole' and its complex and problematic political legacies. I examine how a distinct Creole identity emerged during the colonial and antebellum period and the ways in

which this group identity became synonymous with race (Domínguez 1997). The review of historical literature will take us from the establishment of Louisiana as a French colony in 1699, through to the African-American Civil rights movement of the 1960s, up to the present day where efforts to assert and promote Black Creole identity and heritage remain strong. I review critical approaches to discussions of race and class given the historical tensions between Francophone and Anglophone culture and divergent models of colonization, settlement, and socio-economic development. I reject casual applications of the term hybridity, arguing instead for a more nuanced and contextually attentive definition of creolization as a framework for understanding the relationship between musicways and identity in the region.

Creole trail riding is a complex world that calls attention to human relationships with non-human animals. In the next section I look to multispecies frameworks, feminist and political ecologist thought to decentre the human and recognise that nonhumans can and do shape our world and our experiences. In light of the lack of scholarship on Creole trail riding, I review scholarship on other horse-based festivals and events around the world which celebrate ideas of community, identity and human-horse relationships. Since this thesis also draws attention to trail rider's sonic, sartorial and edible engagements, I look to the work of Tsing (2015) and Bennett (2015) to highlight the material agency of non-human things in the trail ride assemblage and question the possibilities of extending creolization to include nun-human agents.

With Trail Ride Nation now the nucleus of local zydeco culture, I then review the literature charting the emergence of zydeco in early 20th century Louisiana and consider the ways it is entangled in notions of ethnic identity and the politics of difference. I will explore how zydeco has become a 'social arena' (Mattern 1997) within which a specific black Creole identity is expressed and one that is distinct from the white Cajuns who live in the same region.

CREOLES OF LOUISIANA: A HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

Famed around the world for its colourful Mardi Gras celebrations and unique musicways, Louisiana's complex cultural landscape is often portrayed in popular literature as a 'melting pot' (Brasseaux 2005: 2). Whilst Louisiana's cultural forms are indeed born out of a coming-together of distinct cultures, the

notion of a melting pot reduces the complex historical identities that have shaped present day music and expressive practices. With interlocking language and music traditions, a common misunderstanding about Southwest Louisiana is that Creoles and Cajuns are the same people (Dajko 2012) but it is important to clarify they are not. 'Cajun' refers to the descendants of the Acadians (white French-speaking settlers from Nova Scotia) whilst Creoles acknowledge and indeed celebrate a very different ancestry. Although the term 'Creole' has had a myriad of meanings over the past three centuries, which I will go on to explore, in present-day Southwest Louisiana individuals who call themselves Creoles are descendants of both free people of colour and manumitted African-American slaves. Their identity 'is combined with a strong sense of being African American: black identity and French heritage are thought of not only as compatible but as inseparable' (Le Menestrel 2007: 88).

In order to better understand the development of zydeco trail riding, I start this literature review with a synopsis of the social and historical circumstances through which a Creole identity in Louisiana emerged. It is generally agreed the word 'creole' is a French corruption of the Portuguese term *crioulo* which was used for a New World slave of African descent (cf Stewart 2007; Mintz 1996; Spitzer 2003). It was likely derived from the Latin *creare* (to create) and New World Creoles were arguably 'created' by Louisiana's European colonial history and the transatlantic slave trade. As Dormon notes, any discussion of creole or creolization 'must begin with the clear understanding that the term has been used historically in an enormous variety of ways and has taken on a protean quality that can lead to great confusion in the absence of clarification' (1996: ix). In the case of early French colonial Louisiana, *creole* signified someone who was 'of local origin' (Brasseaux et al 1994; preface). It was used to refer to the colony's native-born population regardless not only of their skin colour but of their social caste. Whilst miscegenation was forbidden in the colony, some of this population were born from what Virginia Domínguez has somewhat euphemistically described as 'sexual relations' between Europeans slave-owners and their African slaves (1997: 23). It happened frequently and was undoubtedly for the most part non-consensual. Although children born from incidents of rape and sexual violence were legally slaves, in 'a significant number of cases' (*ibid*: 23) they were granted freedom by their white fathers. These manumissions meant they were free and thus 'legally different from African slaves' (*ibid*: 23). Creoles of color in antebellum Louisiana therefore

'enjoyed something of a *prima facie* claim to free status, while blackness raised a presumption of slavery' (Dormon 1997: 167).

The term 'creole' evolved when Louisiana transferred from French to Spanish control and it came to distinguish the French-speaking population from the new Spanish colonials. It was associated with both Creoles of colour and white Creoles who had become social elites over this period thanks to Spanish land-tenure policies which 'fostered the distribution of titles to land and the parcelling of colonial territory. To a large extent they laid the groundwork for the formation of a landed aristocracy' (Domínguez 1986; 103). The Spanish administration perpetuated the three-tiered class system that had been developed during French control that distinguished whites, free people of colour (*gens de couleur libre*) and African slaves both legally and racially.

In *Creoles of Color in Bayou Country* (2005), Brasseaux et al show how free people of colour became a defined group in their efforts to preserve their social position and cultural identity. Tightly bound by their French language, Catholic religion and social homogeneity, Brasseaux et al highlight how throughout the colonial and antebellum period, Creoles of colour existed as 'a separate class, distinct from dominant whites as well as slaves' (2005: 104). They were educated, wealthy and insular and enjoyed the same political freedoms as their White counterparts. However, things drastically changed after American purchase in 1803, when parts of the state came under US (or 'Union') control. Creoles of colour came to be perceived as a threat by the recently arrived Anglo Americans and subsequently White Creoles. The Creoles of colour tried to maintain the three-tiered system that 'guaranteed them separate status' above freed slaves (Brasseaux et al 2005: 104) during the French and Spanish governments, however the Union refused to recognize them as members of a single class. With the onset of American rule in the colony and statehood, Dubois and Melancon observe 'nervous White Creoles began to insist on excluding Creoles of color from their social and economic power bases' (2000: 254).

By the outbreak of the Civil War, the racial situation in the state had changed from a ternary to a binary classification system, and 'a majority of White Creoles had merged with the various Anglophone groups in the state' (Dubois and Melancon 2000: 254). Snyder illustrates, faced with 'the choice of either inclusion in a multiracial group or forced identification with the crass Americans,

most White Creoles distanced themselves from Creole identity, leaving the term to solely represent those of a nonwhite background' (2012: 66). Reconstruction and the Jim Crow segregationist era rapidly ensured that anyone with any 'negro' blood, regardless of French ancestry, came to be assigned to a single group, i.e., Black and the Creoles of colour were stripped of their special legal status, any political power and in some cases their property. As Ancelet bluntly puts it, 'one was either white or not' (2007: 1240).

Whilst acculturation and assimilation as African Americans was initially 'considered a loss of social access and advantage' (Spitzer 2003: 65) in post-Civil War Louisiana, Creole identity began to shift in the era leading up to the Civil Rights movement. In 1960s there was a move for Creole people to opt to be 'Black'. What was once 'an involuntary and unwanted racial classification' became what Brasseux has called, 'a badge of honour' (2005: 124) for many Creoles of colour involved in fighting for equal rights. Dormon has examined how the term 'Black Creole' as descriptive terminology has become more commonly utilized by Creoles to describe their group today. He notes that 'the value attachments of Louisiana Creoles to their ethnic identity has shifted notably over the decades of the twentieth century' (1996:11) and concludes that 'Black' is clearly a more inclusive terminology. Domínguez too has illustrated how young Creoles, 'reacting to the binary classification of race in the United States, try to enhance pride in their African ancestry' (1986: 181), finding less reason to keep apart and more sense in a shared Black identity.

Dawdy shows how the 'emic meanings of "creole" in Louisiana reveal a dynamic and complex social identity that is not easily dissected into the etic categories of race, class, or ethnicity' (2000: 107). In line with Domínguez (1986) she highlights how a 'creole identity was formed, reformed and reinvented with each dominant generation' (2000: 107). In *Whiteness by Definition* (1986), Domínguez specifically tackles the issues around definitions of Creole identity in Louisiana and the circumstances under which they change. She argues 'social identities do not exist without public affirmation' and contends they are 'conceptions of the self, constructed in time and place both epistemologically and socially in opposition to other such selves' (1986: 10).

Writing on Louisiana Creole expressive practices such as zydeco and Mardi Gras, Nicholas Spitzer puts forward that today there is no 'univocal' meaning in the Creole ethnic category (2003: 63). He

points out Domínguez's approach 'does not deal centrally with aesthetic aspects of Creole life that are at the heart of creating and defining identity situationally' (*ibid:* 60). For Spitzer and Jolivette (2007) such things as family, settlement history and cultural traditions are more central to Creole identity than race or ethnicity, which Spitzer suggests in Louisiana are 'very malleable and interlocked social categories' (2003: 63). He goes on, 'she [Domínguez] tends to deconstruct the shape-shifting meaning of Creole… without much of a sense of what this means in people's personal identities and beliefs' (*ibid*: 60). In line with Spitzer, this thesis understands that to define Creole by its boundaries alone ignores the self-determined personal identity at the centre of the culture. Jolivette (2007) suggests that Creoles have maintained their distinct identity not through bloodlines or perceived notions of race but mostly through their strong cultural forms and it is to this I now want to turn my attention. In the next section, I would like to consider how Creole cultural forms, such as zydeco and trail riding, have come into being and the ways these processes have been theorized.

CREOLIZATION

This research aims to understand the emergence of the distinct Creole expressive form of zydeco trail riding, and its incumbent non-human entanglements, through the concept of *creolization*. I intend to use creolization to explore how the trail ride assemblage has emerged from a specific historical context but is by no means a fixed or finished form. As Snyder illustrates, 'Creoles' collective syncretic culture recombined elements from French, Native American, and African cultures… resulting in a unique Creole culture distinguished by its language, foodways, and music' (2012: 66). I will now review some of the key ways creolization has been put to use and why this is relevant for my research.

Creolization, or 'becoming Creole' as Sheller has termed it (2008), is a metaphor coined specifically to describe 'the process by which people, flora and fauna, ideas, and institutions with roots in the Old World were born, grew, and prospered in the New' (Price 2017: 214). Similarly, Spitzer has defined cultural creolization as an 'organizing concept' that describes 'the development of new traditions, aesthetics, and group identities out of combinations of formerly separate peoples and cultures' (2003: 58). Despite the impression that the term denotes processes of contact and mixing,

creolization is far from a fixed concept. Traditionally associated with New World cultures, like those of Caribbean or Louisianan Creole communities, creolization has seen its semantic field of reference broadened to the extent that it now seems to make 'a fundamental contribution to theories in social science' (Chivallon 2008:18). As I shall explore, it is increasingly, and problematically, being viewed as a global process that can occur anywhere.

A range of terms have developed alongside creolization that have also become synonyms for cultural mixing and exchange. These concepts include hybridity, syncretism, transculturation and intertextuality (cf Cohen and Toninato 2010; Hutnyk 2005) but despite their very different geographical and historical origins, they have been used by 'willy-nilly' by scholars (Stewart 2011). I want to specifically set creolization apart from the closely related concept of hybridity with which it shares much in meaning and implication. Despite its origins in biology and botany (later becoming an organizing concept in race theory and eugenics), hybridity is an ambiguous term and has come to mean all sorts of things to do with 'mixing and combination in the moment of cultural exchange' (Hutnyk 2005: 80). Paul Gilroy for example has found it useful in relation to cultural production, where he observes 'the musical components of hip hop are a *hybrid* form' (1993: 3). Homi Bhabha has used cultural hybridity as an in-between term, evoking a 'third space' which gives rise to 'a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation' (1990: 211). And Tavia Nyong'o has addressed the more corporeal forms of mixing, presenting hybridity as 'a historical alternative to the overly burdened racial identities bequeathed us by slavery, segregation, and ghettoization' (2005: 7). Whilst this literature is relevant to any discussion involving the mixing of musical forms and racialized bodies in Louisiana, as Cohen and Toninato assert, creolization is a far more precise term 'because it is grounded in a well-defined socio-historical context characterized by a specific configuration of power relations' (2010: 14).

Before I delve any further into ideas of history and power, I want to briefly consider the ways in which creolization, not unlike hybridity, has become a useful metaphor for cultural theorists to describe the process of intercultural blending in an era of increasing global interconnectedness (Hannerz 1987, 1996; Clifford 1990, 1992, 1998). Coming from a background in anthropology which for many years had understood 'culture' as something relatively static and bounded, Hannerz argues

we need to see cultures in more 'processual terms' (1987: 550). For Hannerz, our world of movement and mixture is indeed 'a world in creolisation' (1987: 551) and that 'a conceit of creole culture with its congeners may be our most promising root metaphor' (*ibid*: 551). He suggests creole cultures are systems of meaning that give a sense of a 'continuous spectrum of interacting forms' (*ibid:* 552). Hannerz argues for a new macro-anthropology of culture, which takes into account the world system and its centre-periphery relation, appears to be well served by a creolist point of view. It identifies diversity as a source of cultural vitality. Globalization need not therefore be a matter only of absolute homogenization: 'the increasing connectedness of the world also results in some cultural gain…a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world' (1996: 66).

For the likes of Hannerz and Clifford, creolization is ultimately an inclusive and global phenomenon. The term encapsulates all that is positive about notions of cultural mixing and hybridity. Creolization therefore becomes a continuous process that goes beyond understandings drawn only from the transatlantic slave trade. For some scholars of the Americas however, this view is inherently problematic. Price (1992, 2017), Mintz (1992, 1996) and Sheller (2003) have all written on creolization through their work on Caribbean communities. Whilst they too acknowledge creolization is a useful metaphor through which to make sense of the ways diverse individuals historically interacted and together made meaning of their encounters, 'those encounters took place in a very special place and time, not in somebody's imagined *Tout-monde*' (Price 2017: 216). In their opinion creolization is purely connected to, and a product of, the particularly violent matrix of slavery through which African Americans arrived in the US. This is a view point echoed by both Chow (1998) and Hutnyk (2005) in reference to similar uses of the term hybridity, making it possible to forget 'colonial violence, white supremacy, systematic exploitation and oppression' (Hutnyk 2005: 96).

Price (2017) and Mintz (1996) maintain creolization has come under attack by Hannerz and his peers and criticized them for borrowing creolization 'from a geographically and chronologically specific New World Setting without serious attention to what the term meant, or to what historically specific processes it stood for' (Mintz 1996:302). In her work *Consuming the Caribbean,* Sheller takes an even more radical stance on the generalization of the concept of creolization, speaking of a 'theoretical piracy on the high seas of global culture' (2003: 188) which takes the risk of silencing the

terror of the context in which the process of creolization was born. Sheller asserts that creolization is a process of contention, 'deeply embedded in situations of coerced transport, racial terror, and subaltern survival' (2003: 189) and she calls for a returning to the New World roots of its use. Generalizing and dislocating the notion of creolization 'denies the very rootedness that has enabled creole cultures to recreate homes away from home in the face of colonial dislocation' (*ibid*: 195).

Whether or not the concept of creolization can or should be universalized to apply to all cultures that meet in expressive interaction, as Baron and Cara observe, it is clear that the creolization process 'will always have its deepest and most resonant meanings for the peoples who forged new cultures in the emergent Creole worlds of the Americas and in the islands of the Indian Ocean' (2003: 8). Baron and Cara see Creole cultural forms as 'often subversive social and political tools' (*ibid:* 5) that are created and performed by people who lack political power. In this respect 'creole enactments are counter-hegemonic in their challenge to cultural dominance, making creolity nothing but revolutionary' (*ibid*: 5). I'm interested in investigating further Gilroy's notion of 'counterculture' (Gilroy 1993, as cited in Chivallon 2008) and Baron and Cara's 'counter-hegemonic' culture (2003) as ways to interpret Creole cultural forms in Louisiana such as zydeco trail riding. This involves going beyond processes of blending 'to consider a "mode of thought" whose vitality and unprecedented character draw on the aptitude to transform and criticize the heritage of colonization in the New World' (Chivallon 2008: 35). In the case of my own research, I pay close attention to Louisiana's histories of oppression and resistance and how they have shaped present-day practices and entanglements at Creole trail rides and within contemporary zydeco music culture.

ENTANGLING THE NON-HUMAN: ON BEING AND BECOMING

The zydeco trail ride is a complex multispecies world that brings into focus human relationships with non-human animals. In the equine world, 'trail riding' often refers to equestrian tourism in rural settings but the zydeco trail rides in Southwest Louisiana have become a collective ritual that go largely unnoticed by outsiders. Part group horse ride, part music festival, and part dance party, there is no easy way to describe these mobile multispecies gatherings. People meeting to collectively ride out into the countryside for a recreational day with horses, food and zydeco. Previous scholarship on

ritual and festivals has frequently overlooked the role that non-human animals have performed as subjects in these sorts of scenarios. Levi-Strauss, Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard are amongst those prominent twentieth-century ethnographers who focused on the role of animals in systems of totem and taboo. Despite the prominence given to non-human animals, these theorists still tended to 'ignore completely the animal side of the relationship, thereby rendering invisible any social dimensions of human-animal interactions' (Mullin 1999: 219). John Berger has called this the 'cultural marginalization of animals' (1980: 25). Omissions like this have meant 'there is a limited view of how communities connect with nature and how this has shaped their sense of place and identity' (Graham 2017: 12*).*

With an emphasis on 'mutuality', 'becoming' and 'entanglement', more-than-human approaches aim to decentre the human and recognise that nonhumans can and do shape our world and our experiences. The work of Donna Haraway is a key starting point for the 'species turn' in anthropology. In the words of Haraway, companion species tell a story of 'cohabitation, co-evolution, and embodied cross-species sociality' (2003: 4). In the context of her work on dog-human relations, Haraway (2003) asserts we are 'companion species', participants of an ongoing process of 'becoming with' each other in natural cultural practices. This highlights the shift in Western modes of thought regarding human-animal relationships which have long understood humans as separate from webs of interspecies interdependency by which we understand other life (cf Descartes, Carruthers 1989).

The horse has occupied a unique place in the history of human-animal relationships and its status as a key companion species across the globe is undeniable. Since its domestication, which is thought to have happened 5500 years ago in Northern Kazaksthan (Outram et al 2009), horses have played a substantial part in the development, progression and arguably oppression of humanity, which, according to Adelman and Thompson, has been 'seemingly carried forth from the saddle' (2017: 3). Anthropologists have shown the ways in which equines have been significantly associated with the creation and shaping of culture and society (Barclay, 1981; Cassidy, 2002). It is therefore no surprise that horses have also become powerful symbols of identity (Leinonen and Dalke, 2017; Helgadóttir and Dashper, 2016; Rose, 1990) and help people 'connect to very different and potentially competing styles of life – sporting, elitist, pastoral, bucolic' (Birke and Latimer 2009: 2).

Whilst the particular combination of zydeco music and horses is unique to South Louisiana and parts of Eastern Texas, the zydeco trail rides are not dissimilar to other equine-based festivals and rituals around the world which celebrate ideas of community, identity and human-horse relationships. Helgadóttir and Dashper (2016) for example have looked at the *Landsmót*, a biannual equestrian horse event and a major festival in Iceland to explore these ideas further. In a similar vein, Leinonen and Dalke (2017) have studied the *Kuninkuusravit* in Finland to understand the connection between horses and identity. There is also a large number of cultural events where humans, horses and music occupy the same space. Less studied but just as relevant is the Indonesian tradition of *Kuda Rengong* or 'horse dance', a Sundanese circumcision ceremony that marks the beginning of manhood for young boys. The event sees a community-wide parade that includes live music and 'dancing' horses. The furious clop of the horse's feet on the hard street adds to the driving percussion of the local band that plays for the occasion.

I have found the literature of these festivals useful because it details the impact horse-focussed festivals and events might have on notions of social identity and social cohesion within groups. Graham has described festivals as cultural events that 'provide a time and space for people to come together and celebrate what it means to be part of a community' (2016: 216-217). Similarly, Duffy et al have asserted festivals are the 'participation in creating, celebrating, engaging with ideas of community, identity and belonging' (2009: 19), forged by things like animals, music, ethnicity, food and drinks (cf Duffy and Wait 2011: 46). McManus and Graham's (2013) notion of 'eque-cultural' identity highlights how relationships between humans and horses have played a key role in defining communities centered around horses. The term 'enables a discussion on rural identity, which implies a linked relationship between people, land, and farm animals' (Graham 2015: 217). In light of the distinct lack of literature on Creole trail riding, these equine landscapes, or '*equescapes' (ibid*: 216), provide useful ethnographic comparatives to consider how Southwest Louisiana's 'Trail Ride Nation' has been created through encounters between humans, horses and music.

Trail rides are a tangled mass of relations, a place of multi-species becoming, overlapping, unfolding. They call to attention participant's relationships not just with horses but with other non-human agentive materialities such as sound, clothing and food (plants and dead animals). The work of

Deleuze and Guattari on 'becomings' (1987) offers a way of conceptualising the trail ride as a complex and changing assemblage of relations that unsettle the boundaries of nature and culture, showing 'new kinds of relations emerging from nonhierarchical alliances, symbiotic attachments, and the mingling of creative agents' (Deleuze and Guattari as cited in Kirksey & Helmreich 2010: 546). Anna Tsing understands assemblages as 'open ended-gatherings' that 'allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them. They show us potential histories in the making' (2015: 23). Through her work on matsutake mushrooms she sketches 'a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life' (*ibid*: 4). In line with Tsing, I use assemblage to describe 'what gathers in a place, at whatever scale' (*ibid*: 293), as a means of understanding 'Creole' as a fundamentally 'entangled' way of life. Jane Bennett also makes use of assemblage in her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010) arguing for a deeper understanding of what constitutes 'bodies of force'. Shifting from an overarching anthropocentric worldview, she instead aims to highlight the 'material agency or effectivity of non-human to not quite human things' (*ibid*: ix). The image of these bodies of force forming assemblages allows me to look beyond the limitations in human-centered theories of action and in the words of Bennett, 'investigate a theory of action and responsibility that crosses the human-nonhuman divide' (*ibid*: 24). The concept of assemblage is useful in my endeavour and as Johnson posits 'helps to keep in focus the materiality of these unfoldings' (2019: 14). I use the terms assemblage and entanglement throughout this thesis to capture the complexity and materiality of Creole relationships among human beings and non-human things and animals at trail rides.

Ethnographies that place the human body in a web of non-human and material entanglements have been essential for my own research. Focussing on gladesmen in the Florida Everglades, in *Swamplife* (2011) Laura Ogden uses the term 'landscape ethnography' to signal an approach that is attentive to 'how what it means to be "human" is constituted through changing relations with other animals, plants, material objects, and the like' (2011: 2). Understand human *becoming* as a contingent process, Melissa Johnson's ethnography *Becoming Creole: Nature and Race in Belize* (2019) has considered 'more-than-human' entanglements in rural Belize. Much like Ogden, she explores how people become who they are through their engagements with the natural world such as plants, animals, water, and soils around them. In the words of Johnson, 'out of these encounters emerge culture and identity:

we become who we are by dwelling in the world' (2019: 90). Importantly, Johnson also draws attention to the processes of racialization that are present in the entanglements between human and non-human worlds as she explores assemblages of race and colour.

By bringing race into the analysis of human/non-human entanglements, I hope to build on work that has analysed race in connection to non-human and human becomings and following Sylvia Wynter identify how 'humanness might be conceptualized as a relational category' (McKittrick 2015: 8). Borrowing from Edouard Glissant, this research is interested in considering how we think about creolization as a 'poetics of relation' (1997), where notions of identity are constructed in relation, not isolation of more than human engagements. I'm interested in extending the current theoretical framework of creolization, as a process of 'creation, invention, critique and resistance' (Cohen and Toninato 2010: 14), to specifically include non-humans animals and materialities and draw attention to the possibilities of considering the concept across multiple domains simultaneously that includes multiple entities. In her work *Ariel's Ecology,* Allewaert looks at how relational ways of being were crafted as a means of resistance by those who were not counted as humans in the plantocratic system. Allewaert explores the tension between understanding creolization as a cultural phenomenon but also a material and ontological phenomenon. It is my intention to demonstrate how non-humans have become an integral part of this process, extending the notion of creolization to include a mingling of human subjects and cultures where the non-human becomes an integral actor to the maintenance and creation of social worlds (cf Haraway, 2008; Graham, 2016; Kirksey, 2010).

ZYDECO NATION

Creole trail rides have become spirited social occasions centered around horses, food, music and dancing. Trail riding remains not just a social lynchpin of many Creole identifying communities in Southwest Louisiana but has become the centre of local zydeco music culture (Tisserand 1998). The word 'zydeco' is thought to be a creolization of the French *'les haricot sont pas sales'* which spoken in French Creole sounds like 'leh-zy-deeco sohn pa salay'. It translates literally as 'my snap beans aren't salted' and was an expression often heard in traditional Creole songs to describe hard times. In his paper 'Zydeco/Zarico: Beans, Blues and Beyond', Ancelet (1988) unpicks the etymology of the

term ‘zydeco’ and pays homage to the historical roots of the music. Comparing it to blues, jazz and reggae, he describes zydeco as ‘the result of a typically American experience that blended European (primarily French…), native American, and Afro-Caribbean musical traditions’ (1988: 33). To be more specific, Spitzer defines zydeco as ‘a creolization of Cajun tunes (waltzes and two-steps), African American blues, and Caribbean rhythms played on accordion and violin with Creole or French vocals and a rhythm section augmented by a hand-scraped frottoir’ (2003: 63).

In South Louisiana the meaning of zydeco has also expanded ‘to refer to dance as a social event and to dance styles as well as the music associated with them’ (Ancelet 1988: 37). Zydeco’s history has been one of slow but certain change. Its roots can be found in juré, a form of a capella spiritual sung by field hands who accompanied themselves with hand-clapping and foot-stomping. By the 1920s Creole musician Amédé Ardoin laid the foundations for zydeco on accordion, blending old French songs, African songs and hollers to create ‘a uniquely Creole blues form – one that worked within the limits of the instrument (accordion), but captured the inflections of African American blues’ (Snyder 2012:74). At the time Ardoin was recording records, the terms ‘Creole music’ or ‘zydeco’, were not yet used. Instead, this unique Southwest Louisiana blend was simply referred to as French music or ‘*la la*’. Things changed dramatically in the 1950s when Creole accordionist and singer Clifton Chenier shook up the genre by fusing traditional elements of accordion and frottoir (a percussive rubboard style vest that has become integral to zydeco) with the electric rhythm and blues and swamp pop he’d grown up hearing on jukeboxes. He became a hit on regional radio stations and by 1964 signed with independent folk label Arhoolie Records, bringing him, and zydeco, to the nation’s attention. This eventually earned him a Grammy in 1984 and the title ‘The King of Zydeco’ (Tisserand 1998).

If zydeco, as Spitzer (2003) has described, is a creolization of French songs, African hollers and rhythms, then we can see how contemporary zydeco is a further creolization of the genre. Whilst zydeco has to some extent been associated with rural Louisiana (Spitzer 1996) and notions of respectability (Le Menestrel 2007), young Creole musicians today are caught between appealing to an increasingly urban local community whilst also keeping elements ‘symbolic of Creole culture’ in their music (Snyder 2012: 82). As Jared Snyder observes, ‘although they integrate the musical world

around them – from funk, R&B, rap, and rock – they do so from a Creole perspective. Rather than modifying the accordion style, the overall sound is changed by incorporating popping bass, searing guitar, keyboard washes, or Creole-inflected rap' (*ibid*: 82) and auto-tuned vocals. Just as Clifton Chenier had divided audiences in the 1950s, the current generation's musical style has dismayed purists who have at times criticised it for being 'too loud, too urban – in short, that it was not zydeco' (Demars 2016: 8). Whilst the elements of hip hop, reggae and soul found in contemporary zydeco are arguably 'signs of the non-negligible impact of mainstream American culture among Creole youth' (*ibid*: 8), both Marie Demars (2016) and Sara Le Menestrel (2014) are quick to point out that it does not mean these musicians are casting away their Creole roots. Le Menestrel addresses the ways that contemporary zydeco musicians reconcile the dichotomy between rural and urban by highlighting how zydeco musicians, through their connection to trail riding, song lyrics, and marketing strategies 'make a point of reminding their fans of this rural identification' (2014: 224). She contends that 'by claiming and enacting the rootedness of their music within a specific region and heritage while recasting its musical forms and integrating mainstream musical influences, they have transformed zydeco into a site of empowerment' (*ibid*: 226). As I shall address in the chapters that follow, contemporary zydeco's 'symbolic power as a distinctive "black music"' (*ibid*: 226) embraces diversity whilst simultaneously paying homage to its Creole heritage.

The notion of diversity in popular music is picked up by Josh Kun in his work *Audiotopia* (2005). Through a number of artist cases studies Kun illustrates 'the song of America is not singular… but endlessly hybrid, multiple, heterogeneous, and enriching – an always available site of psychological reward, nourishment, and survival for populations who have been taught over and over again that their lives do not matter' (2005: 19). As such for the likes of Kun and Ramsey (2003) there is no discussion of inter-American popular music that isn't also a discussion about racial formation. Kun's book is a reminder of something Stuart Hall has already set out, which is to insist 'that in Black popular culture, strictly speaking, ethnographically speaking, there are no pure forms at all' (Hall 1996: 471). Hall elaborates 'always these forms are the product of partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of negotiations of the dominant and subordinate positions' (*ibid*: 471). This is relevant to my research

because I'm keen to explore how the use of hip hop, rap and soul in zydeco, and their concomitant dress aesthetics, 'speaks to Creole participation in African American and American popular culture as well as cultural dreams back home in the dancehalls and communities of rural French Creole Louisiana' (Spitzer 2003: 70). This discussion takes place more fully in chapter 2 when I consider the rise of the 'low end' in contemporary zydeco and also in chapter 4 as I consider rhinestones, boots and bling and the politics of adornment in the trail ride setting.

ZYDECO AND RACE

As zydeco in Louisiana evolved throughout the twentieth century however, it did so within a setting of entrenched racial segregation and has arguably become inextricably linked to the politics of race, identity and social boundaries. It is to this I now want to focus my attention. As briefly noted earlier, despite the cultural cross-over between Cajuns and Creoles and a shared history of hardship and sharecropping, they are not the same people and a clear social separation in many domains endures. In fact, as Tisserand notes, 'for many Creoles, defining themselves apart from Cajun culture has become essential in asserting their own identity' (1998: 4). Brasseaux et el contend this separation 'is perhaps most evident in the development of Cajun and zydeco music since the onset of the local music recording history in the 1920's' (1994: 117). Whilst the song titles, musical sensibilities and lyrical themes are often the same as Cajun music, Spitzer highlights zydeco numbers 'are distinguished as black Creole by their syncopated rhythms and staccato melodic lines built around call-response voicings' (Spitzer as cited in Brasseaux et al 1994: 118).

Le Menestrel argues 'the distinctions between these categories shape and are shaped by social stereotypes, while discussions of musical hybridization, or creolization, tend to mask persistent tensions along social boundaries' (2007: 88). She goes a step further to show how the Louisiana context 'thus mirrors the way in which the problematic category of "world music", despite its pluralist ideology, also tends to obscure social and racial divisions in the music world' (*ibid*: 88). Mattern (1997) too puts forward a case for considering how music has become a 'social arena' through which

relations between Black Creoles and White Cajuns are partly determined and that the CODOFIL[4] led resurgence of Cajun culture during the twentieth century has come at Creole expense. He maintains that there is the feeling amongst the Black Creole community that their 'contributions to cultural vitality in Southwest Louisiana are too frequently overlooked and that the Cajun revival represents a bid for cultural dominance' (*ibid* 1997: 160).

Le Menestrel (2007), Dormon (1996) and Mattern (1997) have also asserted that the beginning of the Creole revitalization movement and subsequent establishment of groups such as Creole Inc and the Un-Cajun committee were in direct reaction to CODOFIL and the Cajun effort to re-establish its own identity. As Le Menestrel articulates 'the enduring identification of French Louisiana with Cajuns until the mid 1990s encouraged Creoles to claim a distinct identity and defend it as integral to the regions image' (2007: 93). Dubois and Melancon (2000: 247) suggest these attitudes highlight the racial binary division still at work in the state and the extent to which zydeco and Cajun music can still be seen along Black / white lines. This is perhaps further exemplified by a recent satirical Christmas song released by Creole artist Brian Maloid, titled 'Cajun Santa stole my Creole Girlfriend' (2017).

Creole and Cajun identities have long been connected to their evolving musicways. Connell and Gibson maintain that 'music remains an important cultural sphere in which identities are affirmed, challenged, taken apart and reconstructed' (2003: 117). Stokes also writes on the relationship between music and identity, arguing 'music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them' (1994:5). The notion of boundaries is attended to by Barth in his seminal work on ethnicity and is something to which he assigns great importance. He argues 'the nature of the continuity of ethnic units is clear; it depends on the maintenance of a boundary' (1969:14). The crux of Barth's argument is that it is 'the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that encloses it' (1969:15). Therefore, social identities should be understood as relational and not on the social or

[4] The Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) was set up in 1968 to preserve spoken French amongst Louisiana Acadians. This extended to support for Cajun expressive forms like music and cooking.

perceived biological essences which fill the gaps within them. In line with Barth, Stokes maintains 'ethnic boundaries define and maintain social identities which can only exist in a context of opposition and relativities' (1994: 6). This literature is important because it shows the ways in which zydeco has become an 'ethnic marker' for Black Creoles and a conscious effort to define and assert their own identity as distinct from their Cajun neighbours. In this thesis, I extend these ideas to consider the dynamic ways in which zydeco is arguably forging a new 'social identity' as young Creoles are constantly reimagining what the music means. Furthermore, whilst it may seem like a binary problem i.e. Cajun vs Creole, as I explore in the chapters that follow, the attendant issues are far more widespread and systemic.

METHODOLOGY

It was a chance discovery of a Boozoo Chavis record in 2014 that would lead to my own entanglement with Louisiana's trail riders. As an accordion player, I had been listening to zydeco for some time but it was not until Chavis' 'Zydeco Trail Ride' album caught my eye in a Brooklyn junk shop that I became aware of the music's rich multispecies heritage. On the record cover Chavis sits astride a large paint horse, cowboy hat on his head and a red single row accordion in his hands. It is a striking image and one we will return to throughout this thesis (see Figure 0.3).

I was working as a musician at the time, forging a career by applying myself to all forms of musical experience and connecting different disciplines, people and communities through performing, teaching, and researching music along with programming concerts and festivals. Raised as one of four children in South London by a music therapist mother, my brothers and I were picking up instruments from a young age. Our Peckham childhood exposed us to a multitude of difference and the bumping and overlapping of people, food and musicways from all over the world was very much home to me.



Figure 0.3 The album cover of Boozoo Chavis' Zydeco Trail Ride. Maison de Soul CD 1034-2, 1990. Source: © Flat Town Music Co., Ville Platte, LA.

At 14, I had a weekend job playing jazz guitar in a local Caribbean restaurant. By the time I was 15, I had a fake ID and was going to jungle and reggae nights in Brixton, hooked on the totality of the social and sonic experience. Growing up acutely aware of the holistic possibilities of music and its unique ability to foster community, I studied social anthropology at the University of Edinburgh and went on to do a Masters at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama.

Despite an inner-city upbringing, I had an abiding passion for horses. As a child, I'd stand mesmerised at the pomp and fanfare of horse-led funeral processions clattering down Peckham's Rye Lane or the elicit Traveller sulky cart races that tore along Bermondsey high street on quiet afternoons. When I moved back to London after university, I volunteered twice a week for a horse riding charity in Brixton. Nestled between tower blocks and over-ground train lines, the charity

offered riding lessons to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Lambeth council. A local sound system crew stored their sound system in a neighbouring railway arch and on Wednesday evenings would be found there, tweaking wires and perfecting the bass. Reggae and dub rang out across the sand school as we lead young students around the enclosure on horseback. The streets of London provided unexpected opportunities to engage with equines in ways that dismantled their narrow racial and class-based associations in England.

When a UK government funded arts programme took a group of British artists and musicians to Southern Brazil to collaborate with Gaucho musicians and traditional dancers, I was finally able to connect my love of music and horses. I returned to the region the following year with a BBC commission and produced my first short film on Gaucho music and its relationships with horses. Whilst of wildly different origins, the Boozoo 'Zydeco Trail Ride' album cover reminded me of old Gaucho music records I'd seen in an archive in Porto Allegre, with similarly pastoral art design featuring plenty of horses and accordions. I bought the Chavis record, went home and did some research. What was a 'zydeco trail ride' and what sort of underappreciated histories of the American 'West' did the image of Chavis activate? There was very little online but a *New York Times* article published in 2011 titled 'The Zydeco Trail in Louisiana: Horseback Riding and Dancing' answered some of my questions. Further searching took to me to the blog of a Louisiana photographer and on it, the Rainbow Trail Ride Association schedule for 2015. The schedule was a spreadsheet listing the name of the club, the date of their trail ride, a location and a contact number. A crackly transatlantic call with someone called 'Bird' and a few months later I found myself in a field in St Landry Parish with my camera, zoom recorder and another BBC commission.

Nothing could quite prepare me for my first trail ride experience. The riders' warmth, cordiality and capacity for joy had a profound impact on me. After the BBC piece came out, I wrote two further articles for *Huck* and *Songlines* magazines about zydeco and trail rides but found the scope of journalism limiting. I subsequently returned to Louisiana annually to nurture my ties with the trail ride community and attend Black Pot music camp to broaden my understanding of Creole and Cajun music. With a deep desire to further comprehend the complex musical and social landscape of a region I was fast falling for, in 2017 I decided to go back to university and begin my DPhil.

The stories, conversations and interviews in this thesis were generously shared with me during ethnographic research carried out in Southwest Louisiana and Southeast Texas between 2015 and 2022. This included an intensive 18-month period of fieldwork between 2019 and 2020, as well as shorter trips made annually between 2015 and 2022. Given that at that time, there had been such little outside recognition and support of trail riding, my interest in their lives as an 'outsider' was welcomed. Many had seen the piece I'd made for the BBC and were supportive of my enthusiasm for the culture and curiosity in their lives.

Through regular trail-riding I became entangled in the lives of those around me and I feel closely tied by friendship to many of the participants who contributed to this thesis. As connections deepened, I was invited to attend birthdays, thanksgivings, weddings, baby showers and other family events. Over the last seven years we have ridden together, danced together, eaten together, celebrated and also mourned together. In late 2019 the ultimate gesture of acceptance came when I was presented with a glittery Texas Regulators t-shirt and invited to be an honorary member of their group. 'You are family now Gwen' Ashley said as she handed it to me.

Despite the tight, life-long friendships I have made from ethnographic encounters, I am a middle-class white woman from South London. This has shaped every social interaction that I have had working on this project. My attempts to grasp and interpret what I have participated in, heard and seen are always entangled in the facts of my gender, race and nationality. I cannot write these facts out of this and in the words of Johnson on her own ethnography 'the messy politics of these encounters mark everything' that is in this thesis (2019: 16). There are 'considerable ethical complexities involved in trying to represent or speak "on behalf of" racialized groups' (Giancarlo 2016: 226). I, like other ethnographers 'subscribe to the belief that I am not in possession of autonomous and authoritative knowledge about this or any community under study' (*ibid*: 226). The production of ethnographic knowledge is embedded in very clear power asymmetries and just acknowledging these dynamics and my whiteness is no longer sufficient.

On 25 May 2020, George Floyd was killed by police in broad daylight in Minneapolis. His murder sparked a wave of protests across the US and the wider world, calling an end to the ongoing police brutality against Black lives. As I protested alongside my friends in the weeks that followed, I was

confronted with the reality that I would always be a bystander in Black trauma. No matter how much of an ally I can be or ethic of solidarity I can practice, the colour of my skin gives me privileges that my participants and friends will never have. Whilst I'd been welcomed by the trail ride community and increasingly felt a part of it, their sharing stories with me for my thesis was an act of generosity and grace. In light of the continued violence against Black lives and the ongoing local stigmatization of rider's cultural practices, I wondered what possible benefit my thesis could ever be for the community. I felt a heightened and urgent need to re-evaluate my privileged position and research methodologies.

I looked to indigenous, Black, feminist, and other critics urging scholars to be attentive to how knowledge is produced and pay attention to whose voices are heard and whose are not (Stam 2020; Smith 1999; Walia 2012). Decolonial research means 'attending to the historical and current context of colonialism our research operates within, and exploring alternative models of knowledge, "ownership" and dissemination' (Stam 2020: 193). Through a participatory film project, I worked to establish knowledge production as a collaborative process with my research participants. Produced and directed in collaboration with a female-led trail ride group in Southeast Texas and filmed by myself and a trail rider, filmmaking became a means to trial and experiment ways of working collaboratively with the community. We used the camera not as an objective tool but as an instrument of discovery and exploration during this process. This meant we could aim to work across asymmetries, shift roles and reposition authorship. It also meant letting go of trying to control research time frames. Whilst this approach posed a challenge to my finances and expectations of the university, I prioritised the fact that committing to incorporating multiple research ontologies as a way of promoting collaboration and self-representation has a time frame of its own. Smith maintains that self-determination in a research agenda is something more than a political goal, 'it becomes a goal of social justice which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social cultural and economic terrains' (Smith 1999: 116). Our film 'Interrupting the Earth' allows participants to call their own histories into existence and place trail riding in a time and space of their own narration. It is not only a dialogue with my thesis but a creation the community will retain control over, to share how

they please indefinitely.[5]

To even begin to grasp the spirit of a trail ride one has to fully surrender to the totality of the experience. Taking notes, photos or asking too many questions in the early stages of fieldwork felt like it removed me from the embodied immediacy of the ride and also detracted participants from their own enjoyment of the event. Instead, I spent the first six months of fieldwork making friends and getting as involved as I could. This meant dancing on party wagons, riding horses, learning to zydeco and passing time by simply hanging out with people at their camps and around gumbo pots. With a background in journalism I was soon able to put my photography skills to use and was approached to photograph rides for trail riding groups' social media pages (you will see a good cross-selection of these photos in this thesis). This developed into more ambitious multimedia projects and I branched out into working on short promotional videos for trail ride events before beginning work on the collaborative film I have outlined above.

Beyond regular trail riding, I carved a life out for myself in Lafayette where I was based. Being a musician I played at weekly jam sessions, regularly attended zydeco dances, volunteered at a community youth farm and got involved with local arts events. In addition to engaging with dusty trail ride landscapes, I also took up kayaking as a way of exploring some of Louisiana's vast network of waterways (nearly 10,000 square miles of them). From sleepy bayous, cypress-filled swamps or down the expansive Atchafalaya river towards the gulf, kayaking gave me access to otherworldly territories teeming with biodiversity. These worlds would bump up against the trail ride landscape in ways that reminded me that we were never far from a body water. You might eat some fried catfish that had been caught in a local bayou, negotiate turtles or the occasional alligator on the road or at sunset watch the majestic spoonbills making their way to roost at the nearest swamp. The overlapping and unfolding of entangled life in Southwest Louisiana felt endless.

[5] A version of the film can be viewed here:
https://www.dropbox.com/s/wk0h86hotilbj4n/INTERRUPTING%20THE%20EARTH%20WIP.mp4?dl=0

CHAPTERS AND CONTENT

In the chapters that follow, I explore how the cultural identities of Southwest Louisiana's trail riders are constructed in relation to horses, music, clothing and food. I call attention to the significance of such relationships on social cohesion and notions of 'becoming' whilst attending to the contingent and relational histories that they activate. In chapter 1 'Zydeco Horses & Multispecies Musicking,' I discuss the thick network that entangles humans and horses in Southwest Louisiana. Horsemanship runs deep in the state of Louisiana and horses have been key companions in both work and play for rural Creole communities. I show how horses enable people to perform the cultural music event of the zydeco trail ride and explore to what extent they become musicking contributors and companions on the trail ride. With a focus on co-being and corporeal mutuality I consider how collective identity and social cohesion could be produced in the trail ride setting. This chapter also attends to the kind of racialized histories Creole entanglements with equines invoke in Southwest Louisiana. I demonstrate how these relationships dismantle an oppressive colonial past. Finally, I attend to the challenges multispecies frames pose discussing how horses could arguably be viewed as commodities and status symbols with parallels to other forms of trail ride mobility such as pickup trucks and ATVs (all-terrain vehicles).

In light of the transitory and mobile nature of trail rides, chapter 2 'Zydeco Nation: Mobile Music and Zydeco Bodies,' considers the sensual role of musical sound in constituting these temporary sites of assemblage. Leading the discussion with the inception zydeco music at trail rides and rise of the 'low end', I focus on how Trail Ride Nation is created and sustained through a network of vibrations, questioning how music 'on the move' creates a material setting for celebration, groove and belonging. With bass-heavy sound systems booming out from flatbed trailers and pickup trucks, I think through a spectrum of vibrating frequencies and their energetic affectation to explore how the body is reconfigured under the spell of this sonic event. Using theories related to 'Black Geographies', I also address how the concept of vibrations provides a way of analysing temporary spatial practices like parades, festivals or trail rides, within the specific context of the Americas. Considering its emergence within and against longstanding anti-Black practises in Louisiana, I attend to how zydeco's complex

history is activated at trail rides. I consider the ways that can we understand race to be 'audible' in this context and how mobile music can become a 'rebellious wave form' for contemporary trail riders.

Trail Ride Nation has materialized in a variety of distinct events, styles and fashions. With trail ride group names splashed in bright monikers across t-shirts, clothing is a strong visual element of the trail ride, communicating group membership and defining social roles. In chapter 3, 'Blinged Out Riders: Sartorial Styles and the Black Yeehaw Agenda', I demonstrate how Trail Ride Nation is constituted through group dress and how meticulously-designed group shirts have become cultural instruments of self-making and community cohesiveness. With its agricultural roots, Western wear remains a prevalent sartorial element at trail rides. Cowboy related motifs can often be found on trail ride flyers and zydeco dance nights go by such names as 'Boots and Jeans' and 'Dukes and Boots' which hint heavily at the suggested dress code. I discuss how Western styles can become markers of authenticity and have evolved as a means of catching eyes and being seen. Discussing the popularity of Lil Nas X's hit 'Old Town Road' at trail rides in summer 2019, I then illustrate how the 'Black Yeehaw Agenda' disrupts racialized archetypes around the American cowboy. I address how the politics of adornment has been shaped by America's history and consider how 'dress' has become a powerful site of contention and racial meaning. The final section of this chapter looks at the ways hip hop aesthetics have been embraced and problematized in contemporary zydeco, highlighting how sartorial choices and musical styles can signify the heterogeneity of zydeco and complicate narrow constructions of Blackness.

As rallying points for Creole identity, food and music go hand in hand in Southwest Louisiana. In chapter 4 'I'm a Hog for You: Edible Attachments, Mutual Aid and Zydeco Gumbo', I demonstrate how the sharing of food generates and maintains a sense of belonging and community. Considering the rich webs of meaning associated with foodways, I take us beyond the nutritional value of food to explore how commensality can be used to create meaning and relationships. I then discuss the long history of mutual aid in the region and show how trail riding functions as a contemporary site of community organized support and assistance. The history of mutual aid in Louisiana has deep roots in the violent histories of the transatlantic slave trade. From these experiences of coerced transport and racial terror, unique food, language and music ways emerged as a means of subaltern survival. In the

next section, I delve further into this history through the lens of gumbo to understand the divergent roots of this celebrated dish and how entanglements with plants and animals became a means of both survival and every day resistance. I contemplate how we can think about notions of trail rider 'becoming' through engagements and consumption of such creolized dishes as gumbo and the kinds of histories this calls into being.

My conclusion reviews the main argument of this thesis which sets out the ways that trail rider *becoming* is a contingent process caught up in a network of Creole entanglements. Through these entanglements, I show how zydeco trail riding creates a mobile setting for celebration, groove and belonging. It is at once a site of collective action, a practice of mutual-aid, a site of racialization and a mode of resistance. I bring into focus equine, sonic, sartorial and edible elements as a way of exploring what it means to consider creolization across multiple domains simultaneously. In addition to recapitulating on the key themes of the thesis, I point to future research horizons to address how zydeco trail riding could help us to better engage with other contemporary issues.

Trail Ride Nation calls to attention a swirl of identities and hierarchies along with racialized and gendered subjectivities. Whilst we hear from a wide range of voices, the zydeco trail ride has been a world dominated by men and issues of sexuality and gender have not been fully explored in this thesis. Women remain not sufficiently represented in zydeco bands and trail ride groups are often male-led. The exception to this are the female-led trail ride group the Texas Regulators whose reflections and stories can be found throughout this thesis and in our short film 'Interrupting the Earth'. In what follows, you will find a range of intersecting stories collected during my seven-year engagement with the trail ride community. We'll meet a variety of characters with pressing narratives and see a plethora of photos to help conjure the complex web of Creole entanglements in the trail ride landscape.

Chapter 1

'ZYDECO HORSES'[6] AND MULTISPECIES MUSICKING

What I want what I need

Is a stallion in my life

All the time by my side

Lyrics from 'Stallion' by Chris Ardoin (2007)[7]



Figure 1.1 Boyo and Gladiator, Opelousas, LA. Source: Photo by author 2019.

[6] Title of a song by Beau Joque and the Zydeco Hi-Rollers (2000)

[7] https://open.spotify.com/track/6dP1PWgtAJOWA3b3Qa8R2u?si=63c30d8c4ad7485a

Uncle Boyo is leaning up against a battered horse trailer in a muddy field near Baker, Louisiana. Cayenne, his beloved red mare is tethered beside us, her eyes half closed. It's late November 2019 and the colours of the flat surrounding landscape appear bleached. The endlessly hot autumn has promptly given way to a cold snap and the sky is smothered in an indistinct grey. The tall sugarcane in an adjacent field has been recently harvested, revealing the billowing gas stacks of a nearby chemical plant on the horizon. A few miles west, the mighty Mississippi charges south full of the soils and waste of the Midwest.

A steady stream of pickup trucks is pulling into the field, towing rusty horseboxes in their wake and parking where they can find space. The unfolding scene is one of convivial ritual. Friends greet, beers are cracked open and soon the sweet smell of BBQ smoke is lacing the air. Some of the younger riders exercise their horses around the site in preparation for the ride. They sit back in their saddles, weaving casually through the parked vehicles or doing laps around the outer edge of the field. The repetitive clang of a farrier's hammer rings out across the scene as he methodically fits shoes on barefooted horses.

Cayenne continues to doze, seemingly indifferent to the constant flow of vehicles, humans and horses as the field swells in numbers. Music coming from a variety of speakers across the site creates an amorphous collage of zydeco chank-a-chank, the thud of hip hop bass lines and the booty-wop of New Orleans bounce music. The energy of the day is slowly building towards the moment that Breadman calls the riders to assemble and head out. Breadman, an octogenarian DJ operating an old Bunny bread truck stacked with loudspeakers, leads the ride playing zydeco hits from across the decades. The exterior of his truck is a colourful collage of photographs of trail rides of years gone by.

Despite the chilly edge in the wind, Boyo wears simply a T-Shirt, his cap pulled firmly down on his head. He looks out across the site and chats breezily about all the horses he can see. Like recounting memories of old friends, he has a story about nearly all of them. 'I trained that tan walking horse for a guy near Leonville last year' or 'I kept that palomino mare's brother for a time'. A long-time figure on the trail ride circuit, Boyo is affectionately known as 'Uncle' by many in the community. He describes himself as the 'trail ride boss', like a watchman or monitor at the rides. In his high-vis vest, he trots up and down the length of the procession, sometimes spanning as long as a kilometer, and

makes sure everything is running smoothly. This might mean stopping some of the younger riders from trotting through private property or preventing impromptu races in roadside fields.

Boyo's family have a long co-history with horses, 'generations and generations' he tells me as we take a walk around the busy field. 'My daddy had horses when I was a young boy and that's what I remember from being around horses. My daddy did a lot of horse racing'. Boyo learned to ride bareback, holding onto nothing but the horse's mane and his feet tucked into a rope around the horse's girth. 'We never had saddles because we was cheap' he explains. 'My daddy was too tight to buy a saddle. They put us on a horse and say we got a saddle by giving us a rope, and the horse just take off with us in the field and he tell us to hold its hair. So that was a saddle and that's how we learned how to ride horses'.

Boyo fell in love with trail riding at an early age. Growing up in Lafayette and taken out to rides in nearby Breaux Bridge (where now the activity is prohibited), he remembers these years fondly. His skill with horses quickly developed and as a young teenager Boyo was training them to be ridden in return for fifty cents and candy. He tells me at that point he had no idea how big a part of his life horses would become. These days, training horses takes up the majority of his time. It is not unusual to see Boyo on a different horse each weekend, working that particular animal up for someone or other.

Today in the fields of Baker however, Boyo is here with his red Cayenne, the apple of his eye. 'Cayenne is a part of me and I wouldn't trade her for nothing in the world' he says bluntly as he rubs her neck. 'We got a bond. Me and her got a real bond that I don't think will break. I have to wake up to her every morning and be around her every day. I try to explain to people, she's a part of me and I'm a part of her. If anything would happen to her, I don't know, I'd probably stop riding for a while. It's a real bond that we really have and that's a bond I never wanna break with her'.

INTRODUCTION

Boyo's close relationship with his mare Cayenne, and his associations with other horses that day in Baker demonstrate the thick network that entangles humans and horses as citizenry of Louisiana's

Trail Ride Nation. Horsemanship runs deep in the state of Louisiana and horses have been key companions in both work and play for rural Creole communities - from rice harvesting and cattle ranching to playmates in the colourful Mardi Gras traditions, not to mention the local bush track racing and rodeo circuits. Throughout this long co-history of agriculture, mobility and recreation horses have become significant companion animals to rural Creole communities in Southwest Louisiana and are a key symbol of Creole history and identity. In this chapter, I consider how horses as 'non-humans' are enrolled in the trail ride phenomenon and to what extent the sense of collective belonging and cultural identity that marks what it is to be a trail rider emerges from relationships between humans and non-humans. I ask: How do horses enable people to perform the cultural music event of the zydeco trail ride and to what extent have they become musicking contributors and participants on the trail ride? How does the way contemporary trail riders think about and interact with their horses connect them as a community, and what do these encounters add to understandings of collective identity and social cohesion? I will be exploring some of the ways that recreational zydeco trail rides are co-produced and experienced by human and non-human animals and how the intimate and skilled engagement riders have with the non-humans around them brings the trail ride into being. Whilst I am keen to consider equine perspectives as these interspecies relationships become sites of companionship and musicking, I am ultimately interested in investigating how we can understand human becoming, specifically 'trail rider' becoming, as a result of these entanglements.

Pictured in Figure 1.2 is a flyer from the 'Big 8' trail ride in May 2019 boasting three days of live music, DJs and horse related activities. The flyer is a good illustration of the non-human sounding actors present in the trail ride assemblage i.e. horses, musical instruments, sound systems. I am interested in considering to what extent we can conceive of these events as 'contact zones' (Pratt1992), where 'lines separating nature from culture have broken down, where encounters between Homo sapiens and other beings generate mutual ecologies and co-produced niches' (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010:546). In order to conceive the ways that these creolized and hybrid musical



Figure 1.2 The flyer for the Big 8 trail ride 2019. Source: Big 8 trail ride group, used with permission

events are co-produced by human and non-human animals, I am going to begin by talking about how interspecies bonds between humans and equines are fostered in the trail ride setting through ideas about co-being and corporeal mutuality. A more species-centric approach also enables us to remember that 'co-constituted relations may also be those of inequality and oppression' (Cudworth as cited in Wadham 2020: 13). In my discussion of horse participation, I acknowledge that power hierarchies are present in these bonds and a horse's individual agency is always embedded within a wider socio-political context.

Zydeco music is an essential element of the ride and impacts the way people think about and interact with their horses. In the next section I will explore these interspecies embodied interactions through ideas of entrainment and musicking. I consider why people feel good about these relationships with their animals and how these relationships connect trail riders together as the 'Trail Ride Nation'. Embodied engagements and *becomings* with horses are also reinscribed through zydeco music which has a long co-history with horses. I will demonstrate some of the ways that the horse-

based activity of trail riding has influenced the genre in recent decades. The next section of this chapter will step away from music to consider the ways Black trail riders and their horses have been caught up in processes of racialization and resistance, both historically and up to the present day. I will explore the kind of histories Creole entanglements with equines invoke in Southwest Louisiana, extending the notion of creolization to consider how these relationships challenge an oppressive colonial past. Discussed here will be some of the debates around animal welfare that have been directed at the trail ride community and how these connect to disputes that have arisen in the wider United States over the use of animals in the cultural practices of non-white peoples. I will finally pay attention to some of the theoretical challenges that post-humanist frameworks can pose, discussing how horses could arguably be viewed as commodities and status symbols with parallels to other forms of trail ride mobility such as pickup trucks and ATVs (all-terrain vehicles).

BECOMING HORSE: EMBODIED RELATIONSHIPS AND RHYTHMS OF TRAINING

It is late May 2019 and I'm at the Big 8 trail ride in Opelousas catching up with Boyo. The event is taking place on the grounds of the Yambilee building, a large barn-style dance venue, that sits on Highway 190 as you head west out of town towards Lawtell. Directly across the highway is Crawfish House seafood market serving up boiled shrimp by the pound and just East is Don's, a popular drive-through daiquiri spot. The Yam (as it is known locally) has an agricultural arena in the back of its premises and plenty of green space making it a perfect site to host trail ride gatherings. Big 8 is scheduled to run for three days and is one of the oldest trail ride groups in the Rainbow Association – the umbrella organisation with which many of the trail ride clubs of Southwest Louisiana are affiliated. The group's president, Miss Pearl, is a highly respected member of the community with many telling me fondly she's known them since they were toddlers.



Figure 1.3 Horses arrive in a horse trailer to the Big 8 trail ride, Opelousas LA. Source: Photo by author 2019

Until the ride heads out on the Sunday, attendees use the first half of the weekend to enjoy camping out, catching up and sharing food. Later on, the crowd will swell as the youngsters roll in for the Saturday night dance in the Yam's outdoor arena. Until then, people relax by their RVs and see to the gumbos in their black pots. Boyo has just given a small child a ride around the area on Gladiator, a tan Saddlebred stallion he is training. He settles back into his folding chair and reaches for an ice-cold Michelob Ultra from his cooler. Boyo, who works with horses on a daily basis is telling me about the importance of communication and 'being one' with your horse for a successful partnership:

> Training horses is a beautiful thing. They got a lot of good trainers out there I can throw hats to but if you are not one with that horse, what's the point of riding it? A horse thinks just like a human being. A horse is what you put into it, that's what you get out. If you don't talk to your horse, you won't have a horse, all you got is an animal that you're riding. What's the point of having a horse if you can't even communicate with it? I try to take my time, I try to communicate with every animal that is mine and not mine, that's what I explain to people … It's all about what you put into your horse, how you treat your horse and how you wanna be

treated. You treat me nice, I'm gonna treat you nice. You tap me, I'm gonna tap you.[8]

Based on his extensive experience working with equines, Boyo sets horses apart from other 'animals' that you might perhaps otherwise eat. As ox tongue and pig's feet boil in a large pot a few meters away from where we are sitting, Boyo elevates the horse above the status of other animals who for him lack the capacity for a deep inter-species connection. He highlights that simply riding a horse doesn't necessarily constitute communicating with it and extols the importance of needing mutual respect with your horse or 'being one' with it, otherwise the effort is wasted.

If we recognise that as humans we do construct our social and ecological niches in consort with companion species (Fuentes & Kohn 2012), what does this embodied cross-species sociality look like at trail rides? Knowing how to ride and work with your horse in the trail ride environment is an essential part of being a trail rider. This comes from everyday tactile and skilled engagement with equines. This kind of work demonstrates how riders and horses can connect across language and species boundaries. How does one become 'one' with a horse and how do we make sense of what many riders describe as profound encounters with equines? Ideas of co-being and 'becoming together' are instrumental to these avenues of thought, especially when analysing human / horse relationships which are based on corporeal communications. Riding is after all, a collaborative practice 'where horse and human bodies communicate through a set of cues and signs' (Maurstad, Davies and Cowles 2013: 326). These acts of communication help build the relationship between horse and rider, producing patterns of relating that are 'profoundly embodied' (Birke & Hockenhull 2012: 28). Maurstad et al illustrate how horses and humans meet and both change as a result of their encounter, highlighting the intra-activities that entangle and engage humans and horses in terms of relational co-being, due to the collaborative process that is horse riding. These include inter-corporeal moments of mutuality, co-being as an engagement between two agentive individuals (horse and human meeting as subjects) and co-being as becoming horse and human due to the collaborative process that is horse riding (2013: 324).

[8] Raymond 'Boyo' Silvester, discussion with author, Opelousas LA, May 2019

Shane, president of the 'Barn Yard Posse' trail ride group further encapsulates these ideas as we talk about his life working with horses. We are sitting in the back of his pickup truck at the time which is parked in his family's farmyard fifteen minutes northwest of Opelousas. A litter of stray kittens play at our feet and Shane's two young sons are on a small four-wheeler doing laps round the yard. The sounds of local station KRVS's 'Zydeco Stomp' show can be heard coming from a radio in the barn. A turkey squabbles intermittently and Shane's Quarter Horses graze contently in the field. He talks me through the training that goes into fostering a trusting bond with your horse:

> You gotta put a lot of miles on that horse, become one with your horse and let the horse understand you, and understand your horse. You have to have trust. It's a trust thing between you and your horse. You have to trust your horse and your horse has to trust you. As long as that horse trusts you, it'll take you anywhere you wanna go.[9]

What becomes clear in Shane's description is the dialogic nature of his relationship with his horse, where trust and understanding have to work both ways. Shane also refers to the repetition that lies at the heart of the training between riders and their horses. The rhythms of this training, as Evans and Franklin have highlighted (2010), is what structures their lives. The process of training is an embodied activity for both horse and rider involving corporeal learning for each party and a lot of physical contact. Disciplining each other's bodies in such a way that training disappears as horse and rider become one, 'subsumed in the kinaesthetic union characterised by synchrony and synthesis' (Evans and Franklin 2010: 174). Shane goes on:

> A lot of that comes from you working with your horse at home and building that bond with that horse … You gotta build a foundation before you go to a trail ride and once you build that foundation and that relationship you can pretty much take 'em wherever.[10]

Communication is a fundamental part of training and embodied interaction: listening to your horse with your body, a subtle language of touch which is 'the foundational basis of the "partnership" between horse and rider' (Evans and Franklin 2010: 180).

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[9] Shane Boagni, interview by author, Opelousas LA, June 2019
[10] Shane Boagni, interview by author, Opelousas LA, June 2019

> Horses can sense things. All you have to do is pay attention to your horse. I mean most of the time your horses ears will tell you what's going on. If something is going on, they pin their ears backs, perhaps you are in harm's way or something is not right. So you wanna evaluate yourself and do a 360 and see what's going on around you … There might be someone running up on back of you and they ain't used to it, it's just a natural reaction for them to react to it so you just gotta ease them through it and talk to them through it.[11]

Regular and consistent physical contact to both reward, assure and encourage the horse key. Shane listens to the bodily cues of his horse which further illustrates the profound embodied engagement between horse and rider. Horses have a remarkable ability to respond to this language of touch which also extends to the rider's moods and emotions. They know when their rider is nervous or frightened and will react to that. As a result, 'riders have to learn that every part of their bodies which touch the horse communicates *something* and learn to control the communication' (Evans and Franklin 2010: 180).

These are clear examples of the deep relationships that are slowly forged across species boundaries in the trail ride setting. Horses have been described as both 'soul mates and body mates to many humans and the relationship is one that affects and defines both parties' (Maurstad et al 2013; 322). Words like 'trust', 'bond' and 'being one' were common when riders discussed their relationships with their horses to me. Ann Game (2001) who investigates the ways in which 'connectings' between humans and horses are 'creative processes of coming to be' (*ibid*: 1), suggests it is the relation that matters and notions of individual, human, and horse and species are forgotten. We are part human and they part horse by the very fact of co-creating the act of riding together. Horse and human become extensions of each other resulting in what Game calls the 'centaur effect' (2001).

Worth noting here is also the instability of some of these relations. Not all of these partnerships are a success. When discussing any expectations Shane might have when he invests his time in a new horse, he tells me:

[11] Shane Boagni, interview by author, Opelousas LA, June 2019

> I've had all kinds of horses, broke a lot of horses, trained a lot of horses. Not all of them worked out as I wanted them to work out but that's like anything. Everything is not going to be the same, just like people. Everybody is not the same so you learn to deal with it.[12]

The horse-human relationship is fraught with contradictions and the success of the partnership is clearly relative. The term 'breaking', for example, is still widely used to describe the process of training a young horse to be ridden and it immediately summons notions of enforced submission. It is important to acknowledge human-horse interaction 'revolves around complex power relationships that are constantly being (re)negotiated and (re)performed' (Dashper 2017: 5) and a horse's individual agency is always embedded within a wider socio-political context. Horse-human relationships are therefore 'always unstable and the centaur is always becoming' (Birke and Thompson 2018: 8). Trail riders and their horses are constantly in a process of becoming together.

As demonstrated by Boyo and his feelings about Cayenne, the potential for deep bonds in these partnerships is real and life-changing for many riders. Patrick has a similar relationship, proving these connections go beyond just a corporeal connection but manifest on an almost spiritual level for some, thereby becoming horse through a kind of metaphysical merging. Patrick is a horse trainer and competitive rider. I'd met him at a Keith Frank concert at Pat's Atchafalaya Club in the small town of Henderson. Perched right on the levee, Pat's is a 1950's dancehall with original sticky red vinyl bar stools and murals of swamps and cypress trees along the back wall. The band are sound-checking when I arrive. Keith Frank (also known as 'The Boss' on the zydeco circuit) is standing in front of the stage adjusting the sound with an iPad whilst the rest of the band groove on a riff until the levels are right. Patrick is already on the dancefloor with his wife along with a handful of other dancing couples. Whereas younger dancers at the zydeco will often keep their moves looking contained and effortless, showing off their smooth spins, Patrick's flamboyant and expressive dancing style immediately draws attention. Sporting a horse's halter around his neck, like a large medallion, he tosses his head back proudly and picks his knees up high as he steps to the music. He later tells me wearing his horse's

[12] Shane Boagni, interview by author, Opelousas LA, June 2019

halter keeps his horse there with him in spirit. ‘What I love about the trails is what I grew up on. I take horses over anything. I’m half human half horse I sometimes think’.[13]

From the articulation of his body movements on the dance floor to the horse tack he wears like an ornament around his neck, Patrick’s connection with horses is made very clear. His co-history with the animals is a part of his self-definition along with how he presents himself at the zydeco. Birke and Latimer suggest the relationship between horse and human is at its best, one of extension, ‘in which nature as the essence of the horse and the rider and their innate qualities are enhanced and cultivated through working extensions of each other, exercised and developed through participation in particular activities, events and occasions’ (2009:13). Argent (2012) has described this moment as ‘becoming horse’, making the human-horse relationship both extrasensory and also transcendent.

GAITED HORSES: EQUINE BEATS AND MULTISPECIES MUSICKING

The trail ride provides a space for people to come together, celebrate ideas of community and for horse lovers to both enjoy and show off their horses. In the previous section I explored how embodied relationships and notions of co-being between humans and equines tie them as companion species but how else do horses ‘participate’ at trail rides? What kind of impact does the musical setting of the trail ride have on this interspecies entanglement?

What became clear to me is that different breeds of horse carry different meanings and values for trail riders. Whilst the Quarter Horse has traditionally been the work horse of choice for ranching or agricultural activities, the role of the horse in Southwest Louisiana has changed from a work-based status to a status based much more around leisure and recreation. This has made space for other breeds with different characteristics to come to the fore. Gaited horses have seen a marked rise in popularity at trail rides during this time, two of the most popular gaited breeds being the American Saddlebred and the Tennessee Walker. These breeds, usually always used for trail or pleasure riding, are specifically bred for their ambling gaits which differ from the usual horse gaits of walk, trot,

[13] Patrick, discussion with author, Henderson LA, March 2019

canter and gallop. In general, the gaits of gaited horses are 'characterized by having a four-beat rhythm and they are classified as stepping gaits because they lack an airborne (suspension) phase in the stride' (Nicodemus and Clayton 2003: 134). These gaits are also known as 'single footing' because the horse has only one foot on the ground at a time. Each of the legs move independently as they transfer weight to different legs. Since one foot is always on the ground, and the horse is never suspended in the air, there is no bounce for the rider resulting in a much smoother ride. As a result, the rider is having to do much less work to physically synchronise with the rhythm of their horse (as they would do if the horse were to trot or canter) and therefore is not getting out of breath. Historically these horses were favored for long distance riding because of their comfortable gait, requiring less effort on the part of the rider. At trail rides they proved ideal for elderly riders who wanted to be able to 'cruise around in comfort' as Shane described it to me.

Gaited horses have proved extremely popular amongst younger generations too who are passionate not just for the horse's smoothness but also the striking four-beat rhythm of their gait. Evans and Franklin (2010) have used the term 'equine beats' to describe the rhythmical structures that make up the practice of horse riding. The significance of the musicality of these equine beats is made clear to me by JB talking about riding gaited horses such as Tennessee Walkers or Saddlebreds:

> When it comes down to gaited horses, there's a four-beat rhythm. It's a music, well it's a music to my ears. In the trail ride that's what we compete for, it's pretty much what we live to hear. You hit the trail or a road and you can still hear it.[14]

By likening the gait to music, JB takes the horse beyond a companion species and acknowledges them as significant contributors to the 'music' of the trail ride. The horse becomes an instrumental sounding actor in the creation of the trail ride. The competitive element JB refers to is the training that goes into making the rhythm of the horse's ambling gait smooth and consistent, like a metronome.

[14] JB, discussion with author, Leonville LA, April 2019



Figure 1.4 Mavv and his Tennessee Walker, Abbeville LA. Source: Photo by author 2019

Mavv is a young rapper who heads up his own trail ride group near Jennings and has always favoured gaited horses for their smooth ride (see Figure 1.4). I'd met Mavv in the Spring of 2019 at a ride in Abbeville. The ride was over and the crowd were in the barn venue dancing to Chris Ardoin and NuStep Zydeco. I'd stepped outside to take in the last of the evening light. Horse trailers cast long shadows across the field and pink feathery cirrus streaked the sky. With the sound of the band drifting out from the barn, Mavv was pacing around the site on his palomino Tennessee Walker stallion. The horse's pink bridle and blue reins matched the colours of Mavv's trail ride t-shirt. When we get talking at a later date, Mavv tells me of his horse's gait, 'sometimes if there is no music playing, I

sing my own tunes in between the footsteps'.[15] The even-timed four-beat ambling gait is so consistent that Mavv uses it like a beat track when he's out on a ride.

Destiny draws similar musical parallels to riding her own horse. Her Instagram profile is awash with video clips of her riding bareback down the backcountry roads of Opelousas on her beige Tennessee walker Honey. Destiny tells me that riding Honey is like 'making music' as they 'hit licks on the beat together'.[16] Her use of the term 'hitting licks' immediately summons images of drumming, giving the impression of their embodied interaction as a kind of collaborative music making. Another rider on the circuit has even gone so far to name his Tennessee Walker 'Drummer Boy'.

Zydeco's powerful rhythmic drive is what characterizes it firmly as a dance music. Apart from the occasional waltz or swing out tunes that pepper the sets of some musicians, the dance style associated with the genre is based on a two-step. Musically speaking, the snare consistently accentuates the two and four with any of the four major zydeco beats (double clutch, boogaloo, slip double or straight beat). Throughout zydeco's evolution, the accordion has remained a hallmark along with the corrugated rub-board, or *frottoir,* which gives zydeco its unmistakable syncopated rhythm. When a trail ride is in full swing and making its way along the dusty country roads, you cannot fail to notice how closely the cadence of the horses' hooves echo the rollicking tempo of the syncopated beat coming from the speakers. When the timing lines up, the ambling four-beat gait of the Tennessee Walkers accents the one and the off-beat or syncopation of the zydeco music being played. Rhythmically speaking, zydeco and gaited horses can be a close match. To demonstrate this beat matching at the height of its synchronicity, below is a transcription of a 'double clutch' drum beat, described to me by zydeco musician Sean Ardoin as '*boom boom cha, boom boom cha'*, together with the timing of the gaited horse's front / back and left / right footfall. In Figure 1.5, the *booms* are represented by the bass drum, the *chas* are represented by the snare. It is important to stress that the natural speed of a Tennessee Walker's ambling gait will vary depending on the size and weight of the horse but this can be sped up or slowed down with tactile cues from the rider. It is also worth making

[15] Mavv, discussion with author, Abbeville LA, April 2019.
[16] Destiny, Instagram message to author, July 2019.

a distinction between the ambling gait discussed here and other gaits a horse might have which all vary in rhythm. The canter for example is a three-beat gait and therefore would not match or synchronise with zydeco music.



Figure 1.5 Transcription of a basic 'double clutch' zydeco drum beat with the synchronised footfall of horse's ambling gait.

As shown by the likes of Destiny, Mavv and JB, the musicality of their horse's gait forms a significant part of their companionship. A rider's relationship with their gaited horse thus becomes a way of knowing the world through sound, a kind of sonic embodiment of their corporeal mutuality. Feld's notion of *acoustemology* is useful here to understand that life is shared and locates sounding in manners of cohabiting. Acoustemology adds a crucial post-human perspective 'to the continued insistence on the centrality of human practice and agency' (2017: 84) in sound worlds. Instead of subject-object relations, acoustemology looks at subject-subject relations, asking us to reflect on 'the nature of human sonic interactions with all other species, with environments, with technologies' (*ibid*: 94). If we can understand music as a social practice grounded in human and non-human relationships, then let me suggest the musicality of the trail ride is created through the entanglement of humans and equines. Let me suggest gaited horses have become sounding actors and musicking participants at trail rides. Their percussive gait provides rhythm and 'music' when there is nothing coming out of the speakers but also compliments any zydeco played on the ride. Christopher Small's notion of *musicking* forms a ritual through which all the participants explore and celebrate the relationships that constitute their social identity:

> The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of

> musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world (Small 1998: 13).

A trail rider's identity is constituted in part by their relationships with horses as they collaborate to create the trail ride as a musical activity, an activity in which humans, horses and sound systems (as will be discussed in my next chapter) are all participants.

DANCING HORSES AND ENTRAINMENT

In South Louisiana, the meaning of zydeco has expanded to refer to not only the music but any social event you might go to hear zydeco being played and also to the two-step dance style associated with the genre. This means you can zydeco to zydeco at the zydeco. How does this look however if the zydeco is not a dance hall or club but a mobile trail and your dance partner a non-human? The human-horse relationship in the trail ride setting is a deeply musical relationship. Horses have been longstanding companion animals for Creole communities in Louisiana, they are key for trail ride mobility and arguably could also be understood as dance partners on a mobile trail that is accompanied by a constant soundtrack.

I drive out to Parks one Friday morning to talk to Alton, a life-long trail rider and self-titled 'original Creole cowboy'. The route takes me down a long straight stretch of the LA 353 past Lake Martin. The suburbs of Lafayette have slipped away at this point and the Acadiana countryside rolls out before my eyes. Stately live oaks draped with Spanish moss stand like sentinels in the flat fields. I pass a sign for Catfish Haven RV Park, an assortment of road kills and the occasional rust-stained corrugated barn.

Alton lives just past Club Valentine in Parks (a historic zydeco music spot owned by Clifton Chenier's first drummer Buchanan Ledet). He is waiting for me by the roadside so I know where to find him and waves me in to park by his small white clapboard house. A tan cowhide is draped over



Figure 1.6 Alton 'Billy' Francis, Parks LA. Source: Photo by author 2019

the porch baluster and a muddy pair of leather cowboy boots are leaning against a large cooler. Alton's elegant brown 1970s Cadillac is parked up alongside the house, its once brown paint now chipped and pealing after decades buckling under the weight of the Southern humidity.

Alton is tall and welcoming. He is wearing a casual sweat suit, white trainers, a bandana around his head topped off by an American Legion cap. When he smiles he reveals two shiny gold grills on his front teeth. He ushers me into his small home and the cold of the air conditioning hits me like a wall. The blinds are all shut so not a drop of natural light can peak through and I have to blink a few times as my eyes adjust to the darkness. As the room comes into focus I take in Alton's home. The small house is like a museum or more a shrine to all things 'western'. Every surface and patch of wall is adorned with various cowboy-related trinkets and long rows of cowboy boots line the outer edges of the room.

Alton immediately starts showing me photos, handing me old leaflets and talking about his former trail riding days. The actor Matt Dillon and the film *Gunsmoke* are dropped into the conversation

regularly as a comparative lifestyle reference. We sip Sprite and Alton happily reminisces about his trail ride days of the 1970s and 80s, talking with particular fondness about his dancing horse Bieffy:

> When we had music on the ride it was such a fun thing. It gave us a very emotional spirit of keeping the tradition from our grandparents and parents. When you look at *Raw Hide*, there was always someone playing music, we did the same thing. We had music. Every weekend we were looking forward to going to a ride. During the week, we would exercise the horses for the ride on the weekend. My favourite horse was Bieffy … she was very proud. She would press on the sides, she was a sidestepper. We'd zydeco and she would side-step through the music.[17]

Alton highlights how the presence of music on the rides connected him to his ancestors and also to the popular 'cowboy culture' seen in mainstream western movies of that era. The presence of music also impacts his interpretation of his horse Bieffy who is conveyed as his dance partner as she sidesteps and they zydeco together. He describes her as proud and therefore performative in her dance displays.

The trail ride landscape provides a leisure space not only for humans to enact their relationships with horses but also to perform these relationships to one another. How can corporeal exchanges between human and horse be further explored through the context of dance? How are perceptions of interspecies intercorporeality and synchronicity shaped by the presence of music and what is the sensuous and affective nature of this?

I first came across of the notion of horses dancing at trail rides in Tisserand's *Kingdom of Zydeco* (1998). Zydeco musician Jeffrey Broussard (and long-time player on the trail ride circuit during the 1980s and 1990s) is quoted observing of the rides, 'it's a lot of people that like horses and zydeco… Some horses will even dance to the zydeco beat' (Broussard as cited in Tisserand 1998: 322). In the early stages of my fieldwork, whilst participating in rides from a wagon, people would often remark about passing riders on horseback, 'look at that horse dancing!' or 'that horse can zydeco!'. Whilst the idea of a horse consciously zydeco dancing might seem far-fetched, with the clear rhythmic parallels

[17] Alton 'Billy' Francis, interview by author, Parks LA, March 2019.

between zydeco and the gait of pacing horses I was interested in interrogating this further.

Game (2000) and Argent (2012) are both scholars who have drawn clear parallels between the practice of horse riding and the practice of dance which both involve a dialogic mutuality of bodies or synchronicity. We become in sync through entraining with some action of rhythmic or synchronous movement such as music or dance activities. Clayton describes the term entrainment as 'the process by which independent rhythmical systems interact with each other' (2012: 49) resulting, in some cases, in those systems synchronizing. Entrainment is a particularly useful concept in music contexts as it describes 'a shared tendency of a wide range of physical and biological systems: namely, the coordination of temporally structured events through interaction' (Clayton, Sager and Will 2004: 3). Similarly, Evans and Franklin have suggested internal rhythmic synchronization between two independent organisms happens through exposure to an external rhythm (2010: 178). With the constant backdrop of zydeco resounding from the speakers, the trail ride could be conceived as its own process of entrainment as a clear example of a 'temporally structured event'. The amplified music acts as the pulse to which the bodies of horse and riders entrain, resulting in rhythmic coordination, as if dancing, between zydeco, horse and rider. This ties in with previous scholarship on the practice of dressage where riders and horses, through a process of entrainment, learn to move together in sync often to an external pulse (Game 2000) (Argent 2012) (Maurstad et al 2013) (Evans and Franklin 2010). Dressage celebrates notions of musical rhythm and disciplines the horse's body into apparently synching with music, creating what Vanderlinden has described as 'the illusion of a fluid and collaborative dance' (2019: vi). The horse and rider engage in a process of harmonising their individual rhythms to engage in something they would not do individually. Dressage competitions include freestyle tests where the horse and rider perform a list of set movements to musical accompaniment of their own choosing. You don't need to look far on the likes of YouTube to find remixed videos of these tests where the original soundtrack (often a piece of classical music) has been swapped out for a piece of hip-hop or hard rap in the same time signature. These remixes give the impression of the horse 'dancing' as it syncs with the rhythm of these beats.

Talking about his dear red mare Cayenne, Boyo conveys how her 'dancing' and 'cutting up' (a local term for letting loose and having a good time) at trail rides is both an expression of their

partnership and a performance of their co-being:

> Horses loves being around horses that cuts up. You don't think it but I know they do. And they show off, like my little red horse she knows when people watching. She goes to dancing, she gonna be smooth, she do the most you know. That's why I call her Cayenne. Cayenne do the most. She put her foot work in. She really do the most, so that's a good thing for me, that lets people know, Boyo still got it…Actually she is my dance partner coz I can make her dance when I'm on her back, and cut up when I'm on her back so she is my dance partner.[18]

Boyo reaffirms his identity through his embodied relationship with Cayenne but also confirms his masculinity in his ability to 'make her dance', revealing a definite power dynamic in his understanding their bond. This display of hyper-masculinity upholds outdated ideas about partner dancing where men traditionally lead and genders Cayenne's non-human body. Boyo sees their 'dancing' as an important way of keeping his status in the community, letting people know 'Boyo still got it'. Their embodiment clearly has a performative element for Boyo and Weiss stresses that 'the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interaction with other human and non-human bodies' (1999: 5). Boyo goes further and also attributes a sense of performative self-awareness to Cayenne who 'shows off' and 'knows when people are watching', by being both smooth and also 'dancing'. He reads this from how she communicates with the position of her ears, her eyes and how she holds her body. Evans and Franklin writing on dressage riders describe how horses are often interpreted as 'proud' or 'smug' but also acknowledge 'how much of this is anthropomorphizing remains moot' (2010: 176).

Whilst the human riders are acting as they would with a human partner – feeling the groove of the music and synchronizing with their partners movements, the question remains whether their horses are actually entraining. Thinking through music as a shared and embodied activity, what can research on horse audition and beat perception offer ideas of non-human entrainment? To argue there is entrainment going on is to argue there is some kind of equine perception of music happening but can

[18] Raymond 'Boyo' Silvester, interview by author, Lafayette LA, October 2019

horses actually tell the difference between sound and music? As prey animals, horses are incredibly sensitive to sound and utilise both their hearing and sight to alert them to potential danger. Bregman et al have noted 'horses have a broad region of best hearing sensitivity, which overlaps considerably with the range of best hearing in humans' (2012: 146). Given this strong overlap, they suggest it is likely that 'horses hear human music quite well' (*ibid*: 146). Existing research suggests playing music in their barn can have a calming effect on their emotional state (cf Carter and Greening 2012, Stachurska et al 2015, Marlow 2015), acting as a tool to mask outside sounds that keep horses hyper-vigilant. Marlow (2015) goes so far as to propose they are most responsive to music with strong rhythmic patterns and short melodies, like country music, which is also in a horse's safe auditory range.

Given the frequent use of music in dressage and other horse training, it is surprising there is a distinct lack of research engaging with the equine capacity for rhythmic entrainment and synchronisation. This raises important questions about animal sentience and also the power of rhythm on human and non-human bodies. Away from the barn and in a trail ride setting, are they conscientiously entraining to the zydeco played on rides or just following tactile cues from their riders? There are examples of acoustic and visual entrainment in many other species for example frogs synching in chorus or synchronous firefly flashes. As stressed by Patel et al (2009) however, these examples of non-musical synchronization differ from actual musical beat perception, begging the question whether BPS (beat perception and synchronization) is a 'uniquely human ability' (ibid: 459). In one effort to determine whether there is BPS in horses, Bregman et al (2012) correlated horse footfall to a musical beat but without the presence of a rider so as to eliminate the possibility of the horse sensing tactile cues. Whilst they were able to identify synchronized bouts in the trial, they determined their evidence was inconclusive as to whether or not synchronicity was a coincidence. Wilson and Cook (2016) offer an alternative view that investigations into animal entrainment have barely even begun. They read Bergman et als' trial as a suggestion that a trotting horse can indeed synchronize to music but it's a matter of 'voluntary control' (ibid: 1647), thus endowing the animal with some agency. Further research on the horse's ability to coordinate with music would be an important addition to this enquiry along with the implications entrainment in animals could have for

our understanding of music and dance in humans (Wilson and Cook 2016).

Applying ideas of entrainment can help us understand trail riding as an 'integrated, embodied and interactive process' (Clayton, Sager and Will 2004: 2) between the triad of humans, horses and zydeco. Riding the trail becomes a collaborative, multispecies-effort and entrainment a key concept through which to consider the implications of co-being as people move in synchrony with their horses and also at times fall in step with the music. This kind of fluid and hybrid mutual-embodiment of the music gives the sensation of dancing to both riders and onlookers.

BECOMING TRAIL RIDE NATION: GROUP TRANSCENDENCE AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The trail ride is not made up of just one horse and rider (be)coming together: sometimes up to two hundred riders with their horses are present on the ride. How can ideas about bodily rhythms, corporeal synchronicity and 'muscular bonding' (McNeill 1995) inform the analysis of human-horse relationships at trail rides? What are the implications of group entanglements with non-humans for notions of social cohesion and collective trail ride identity?

I want to start by briefly exploring how notions of space and belonging can be produced through the affective dimensions of sound and rhythm in festival and street parade scenarios. Duffy, Wait and Gibson (2007) use the concept of rhythmic time-space as a means to examine the emotional and affective dimensions of street parades in rural Australia in establishing and maintaining a sense of belonging for the communities involved. They suggest that rhythms and sound are the 'supreme mode of relation between bodies' (ibid: 17) and it is our embodied response to rhythm that is crucial to the marking out of a space of communal identity and sense of belonging. They urge us to see place not as a static backdrop but as 'a continuous set of relationships … occurring within rhythmically structured place' (ibid:5). These ideas are extended by Duffy et al (2011) who analyze corporeal capacities to engage with festival spaces and the role of bodily rhythms in constituting social worlds. Drawing on Lefebvre's (2004) Rhythmanalysis, Duffy et al demonstrate how bodies produce festival and event spaces 'through embodied responses to the rhythmic qualities of sound' (ibid: 17). They also suggest



Figure 1.7 A moment of synchrony at sunset, Bayou Bash trail ride Mamou LA. Source: Photo by author 2019.

that the capacity of the body to absorb rhythm has an important role in creating deep communicative interaction and social bonds between individuals in a group. Lefebvre uses 'eurythmia' as a key term to describe 'a polyrhythmic relationship between rhythm (and ensembles of rhythms) which has a harmonic resonance' (Evans and Franklin 2010: 177). We can understand the trail ride as a eurythmic whole made up of the individual rhythms of horse, rider and zydeco. Whilst each horse and rider are engaged with their own intra-activities, these mobile processions are held, suspended in some ways by the accompanying music. According to Keil and Feld it is the capacity of the body to sense rhythm that works to merge bodies together sustaining a sense of being 'in the groove together' (1994: 197). Likewise, Keil's notion of 'participant discrepancy' (1995), moments of being out-of-time, are also what create 'groove'. The sense of being in the 'groove' on a trail ride is palpable. The combination of equine beats complimenting zydeco beats has become an intrinsic sonic element of trail riding, keeping everyone in the groove. Discussing ideas of finding connectedness through moving in and out

of out sync with other humans and also horses, we could therefore conceptualize the long procession of horses, riders and sound systems on the trail ride as 'one shared body' which affirms its participants positive sensation of being part of the collective Trail Ride Nation.

The ways people think about and talk about their horses illustrates the whole event is a musical activity with the potential for numerous levels of entrainment to happen. The entrainment model requires us to look at any engagement with music as an embodied interaction. Trail riders can be seen as embodying multiple rhythmic processes - that of their horses, that of the zydeco being played on ride and that of the 'shared body' they are part of - moving in time with each other and in time with the music. Clayton puts forward that 'entrainment in musicking implies a profound association between different humans at a physiological level and a shared propensity at a biological level' (2004: 21). This illustrates how the experience of trail riding is always social, participatory, human and non-human, cultural and natural.

I talk to Jayda on a party wagon at the *Avenue Riders* annual ride in Parks, Louisiana. She is usually riding her horse but her trailer was broken and so that day she had come on her own. The wagon we are on is at the head of the procession and stretching out behind us a long line of riders. The mood and energy on the wagon that day is raucous and celebratory. Bodies dance and voices singalong in chorus to the music, occasionally calling out to friends on horseback who are live-streaming the party straight to Facebook. 'Love in the Stable' (2014) by J Paul Jr and the Zydeco Nubreedz is booming from the speaker rigged to the front of the wagon.[19] The addition of piano keys combined with Paul's heartfelt vocals, gives the song a strong soul music edge. 'I wanna make love, in the stable, just me and you girl' he sings with his husky voice before kicking back in with a drawn out accordion riff.[20] Jayda is wearing a sleeveless denim jacket with embroidered lettering of her trail

[19] https://music.apple.com/us/album/loveinthestable/461119338?i=461119431

[20] Popular at trail rides in both Louisiana and Texas, J. Paul Jr. and his band The Zydeco Nubreedz started making their mark on the zydeco scene in the mid 1990s. Born in Conroe the son of a Bishop, J. Paul Jr. grew up singing in his father's church. His father also ran a recording studio for gospel artists and helped on the production of J. Paul. Jr.'s first three albums. The influence of gospel can be heard throughout his discography in the soaring harmonies in many of his songs. His first album 'Taking over' (1997) was released under the name 'J. Paul Jr. and the Zydeco Newbreeds'. Paul is pictured on the album cover in a plaid shirt, grinning broadly as he holds his single row accordion. Ten years later the band is going by 'J. Paul Jr & the Zydeco Nubreedz' and the influence of soul, R&B and hip hop is undeniable in their subsequent releases both in terms

ride group, *Strong and Sexy Riders.* Over the surrounding cacophony, she talks about her feelings of calm and unity with her horse and with other riders:

> Well actually, it pumps you up. It's peaceful, like being in the woods. You know how it is when you're actually camping out. And it's like just you and the atmosphere. When you are on the horse that's how it is. You are just one group. It's like really deep but it's good. It's a good feeling. It gives you a sense of unity, with everybody. It's like everybody as a family just trail riding… Everybody is riding their horse, everybody enjoying themselves. It's just a mutual feeling.[21]

Jayda articulates the profound connection she feels to the rest of the riders and also to the natural environment. The trail ride becomes a site of co-being, of boundarylessness and of pleasure. In moments of synchronous movement, Argent suggests that we transcend our sense of individual selves; 'we are "there", but our identities expand outside of our boundaries' (2012: 121). It is no longer the doing that is important but the being, being part of a larger event. She concludes that it is this entrainment and synchronous feeling of boundary loss that leads riders to describe their relationships with horses as transcendent and spiritual 'allowing connection with something larger than themselves' (*ibid*: 121).

Writing on such collective activities such as military drill and dancing, McNeill (1995) observes that moving together in rhythm encourages emotional bonding and a shared sense of identity. He asserts, 'the emotion it arouses constitutes an indefinitely expansible basis for social cohesion among any and every group that keeps together in time, moving big muscles together and chanting, singing, or shouting rhythmically' (*ibid*: 2). McNeill has termed this phenomenon 'muscular bonding' (*ibid:* 2). When humans move purposefully together producing a sense of 'pervasive wellbeing … more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to collective ritual' (McNeill 1995: 2).

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of musical instrumentation, vocal style and Paul's dress aesthetic (sartorial styles will be discussed further in Chapter 3).

[21] Jayda, discussion with author, Parks LA, October 2019



Figure 1.8 The Westside Riders trail ride, Ville Platte LA. Source: Photo by author 2015

There are other ways that muscles matter in this context. The activity of riding regularly has an impact on both human and non-human muscles alike. For the rider, engaging the muscle sets of the inner thighs against the horse's ribcage is essential for both staying in the saddle and communicating with the horse. McNeill's 'muscular bonding' is useful to also think through how these embodied ways of relating change our bodies over long periods of time. The physical transitions on both human and non-human body reinforces notions of 'becoming with' as both are changed as a result of these entanglements. Riders are in a process of becoming with their horses, are muscularly bonded with their animals and also with the rest of the ride.

These lines of thinking make clear how collective movement with not just horses but other riders help foster a sense collective identity as trail riders and wider belonging in the Trail Ride Nation. Its citizenry perform and assert their self identity and their cultural identity as trail riders through their relationship with equines and each other. If non-humans can and do shape our world and experiences, how is this co-history activated at trail rides? So far, I've considered how horses can be seen as musicking participants and even dance partners on the trail ride but as companion species they have also been tangled up in processes of racialization and resistance. In the next section of this chapter I

will ask: What kind of histories do Creole entanglements with equines invoke and how can these relationships also function as sites of antiracism?

ENTANGLED HISTORIES: RACE, RESISTANCE AND CREOLIZATION

On Tuesday June 2nd, 2020, over 40 trail riders rode their horses through the streets of downtown Houston. They trotted, fists in the air, right into the city centre and assembled on a manicured grass lawn surrounded by the towering glass skyscrapers of the city's central business district. The riders joined thousands who had taken to the street that day to demand justice for the killing of George Floyd and an end to police brutality against Black lives. 'No justice! No peace! No racist police!' they chanted with the crowds. Whilst the crowds that day were united in their collective march for social justice, the rider's presence on horseback was also a powerful and symbolic act of resistance in itself. It put the riders on the same level as the police who are generally the only people mounted in urban environments and challenged dominant narratives about who has access to horses in the US.

Images of the riders, who are from the Texas based trail ride group Nonstop Riders, were subsequently widely circulated and celebrated across social media with tags such as #blackcowboysmatter #blackpower #trailridenation #blacklivesmatter #equinetherapy. In the days that followed, similar photos of African American horse riders emerged from Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Austin, Los Angeles and Atlanta. Some Instagram accounts used the images as an opportunity to highlight the historical marginalization and erasure of Black lives from the American cowboy narrative. The non-profit @ebonyhorsewomen, posted about the ongoing obstacles Black men and women experience in contemporary equestrian spaces in the US. The public comments responding to posts like these were supportive but also revealed a distinct lack of awareness about Black equestrian culture, confirming Adelman and Thompson's call for there being 'a particular need to think further about how people's access to horses and equestrian technologies may be "classed" and "raced" in ways similar to – or different from – other social milieus' (2017: 8).

Public comments on a YouTube video[22] posted by trail ride group 'BarnYard Posse' of their 4th Annual Trail ride in Opelousas 2012 demonstrate trail rides have previously clearly divided the online equine community. The online responses expose not just a general ignorance about Black trail riding but also highlight the degree to which the community has been caught up in processes of racialization in connection to their practices with horses. The 9-minute video shows clips of the ride in full swing. Happy families dance on party wagons, participants wave from truck tail gates and a long line of horse riders trot past the camera. The footage captures the joyous and celebratory feeling of a large-scale trail ride. However, 'chaos', 'wreckless' and 'cruel' are just a few of the negative and outright racist remarks posted beneath the video clip, some of which I share below:

> **Greenbettas13** 1 year ago
>
> Half these people had NO IDEA WHAT THEY WERE DOING!!!!!!! OMG

> **Amber Slagle** 5 years ago
>
> Some of these people couldn't even hold the reins the right way.

> **Sam Lanex** 3 years ago
>
> Most of these don't even know how to ride!! Crulty. [sic]

> **Snail Mail360** 2 years ago
>
> I'm betting half of those people are drunk and never had any equine experience

> **Bunny Tips and tricks** 1 year ago
>
> I don't think these people know what horses are

[22] BarnYard Posse's 4th Annual Trail Ride. 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_qG9a4FCQM

Meredith Harvey 3 years ago

The horsemanship of some of these people is horrible … omg some of these people should not be on horses

The frequent and reductive labeling of the riders as 'these' or 'those' people immediately sets them apart as 'others'. The dehumanizing comments portray the community as socially subordinate and fundamentally incapable of riding and caring for horses, thereby reanimating old racial profiles and stereotypes. These attitudes are not just confined to the realms of the internet. Trail riders can be met with similar hostility face to face. On an autumnal trail ride through the prairies of Lecompte in 2019, one local woman made her opinion of the sight and sound of what was passing by her door very clear. Jarvis, president of that particular trail ride, recounted his encounter with her to a group of us on a wagon shortly after it happened. 'Tell your people' she had pointedly said to him, 'I'm calling the police and there will be heavy fines'. The reaction from those listening to Jarvis was of anger and utter dismay. '"Your people"?!' someone exclaimed, 'she actually said, "your people"?!' [10]. Both this brief anecdote and the comments on the YouTube video reveal how the sight of Black trail riders and their relationships with horses have been intensely racialized. If we understand race as a visual issue[23], race as 'a matter of looking' (Smith 2014: 2), trail riders are produced as racialized subjects through the gaze of some white observers. The comments also highlight that American equestrian technologies have been cultivated as a space and activity for the white. This racial exclusion has served to erase African American presence from both equestrian spaces and also, I would argue in line with Davis, from 'the outdoor recreation community' (2018: 2). For Davis, this myopic conception has had the effect of 'promulgating the belief that African Americans have few or no cultural ties to the natural environment' (ibid: 2). Davis argues that 'colorblind portrayals of American identity (e.g., photographs of American wilderness) that erase the presence and impact of

[23] Whilst race relies primarily on visual markers, it can also be 'audible' and that will be discussed in chapter two



Figure 1.9 African-American cowboys at a state fare in Bonham, TX. Source: Texas State Historical Association 1913

Africa Americans in the outdoors' (ibid: 6), are also responsible for contributing to such beliefs.

These racialized debates around animal welfare that have been directed at the trail ride community connect to disputes that have arisen in the wider United States over the use of animals in the cultural practices of non-white peoples. Claire Jean Kim in her book *Dangerous Crossings* show how these disputes evoke centuries-old racial tropes 'that function in each case to displace attention from structural racialized exclusion onto the supposed character flaws of these groups' (2015: 4). Jean Kim asks us how to think about what constitutes cruelty to animals and who has the authority and standing to decide on these matters.

It is not the first time that horses have been entangled in the story of race and resistance in the history of the South. It is vital to recognize the socio-historical dynamics in Louisiana that have shaped the emergence of the contemporary practice of Creole trail riding and equestrianism. The state has a rich history of ranching and horsemanship to which the Creole population has been key. There is a long legacy of Creole land ownership in Louisiana but the historical contributions of cowboys and

cowgirls of colour to the cattle ranching ecology in the South are only recently coming to light (Wagner 2011, Pearson 2004, Liles 2006). It is a history that as Liles highlights 'has been vastly under-appreciated and rarely acknowledged' (2006: 26). Although scarcely depicted in Western films or literature about the American frontier, historical evidence demonstrates that at least one in three cowboys working the ranching industry in and around Louisiana, Texas and the Mexican border was of colour (Katz 1996)[24]. This means an estimated nine thousand African Americans were in engaged in the cattle industry in the late 1800s (Pearson 2006).

Whilst the horse has come to be a symbol of rural Creole identity, it can also be linked to the struggle for Black mobility in the era leading up to the Civil Rights Movement. The ability to be mobile in the United States has been 'fundamentally intertwined with the construction of racial identities' (Hague 2010: 331). Alderman and Inwood point out that 'access to mobility and its accompanying opportunities is not socially neutral but historically embedded within unequal distribution of rights and racialized hierarchies of power' (2016: 602). Beginning with enslavement, continuing right through the segregation of the Jim Crow era up to the present-day mass incarceration of Black men, the historic and ongoing restriction and regulation of African-American movement shows us 'the politics of race and the politics of mobility' in the US have been 'joined at the hip' (Cresswell 2012: 260).

Despite the fact that Creoles and African Americans had a circumscribed position in society (with Creoles particularly experiencing a change in position after the Civil War), Giancarlo has highlighted they were able to find 'a measure of freedom through horsemanship and ownership of land' (2017:120). In line with Alderman and Inwood (2016), Giancarlo (2017) maintains Creole trail riding has thus become a powerful 'counter-mobility' and symbolises not just an embodiment of a rural heritage but also an action of Black resistance and self-determination as the rides move freely through the countryside, in all their visual and sonic glory, claiming space and challenging local government restrictions on the activity (see Johnson 2013).

[24] Since conducting fieldwork, the representation of African American cowboys and cowgirls in films is starting to increase with the release of such films as Concrete Cowboy (2020) and The Harder They Fall (2021)

Let me suggest that the equine / human entanglement in the trail ride setting, in line with Stanley Niaah writing on dancehalls and juke joints, constructs 'a politics of enjoyment' (2007: 207) even as every-day and historical experience works against that state of being for its participants. The rise of Tennessee Walkers at trail rides for example subverts and reclaims the breed's historical use as a plantation horse. The Tennessee Walker was specifically developed in the Southern states for use by plantation owners who needed to cover the ground of their plantations in comfort and with speed. It was originally known as the 'Plantation Horse' but that name was dropped in 1935 'since it was feared that the word "plantation" might limit the scope of the breed in the minds of people not familiar with the strain' (Warden 1947: 139). Their popularity with the younger generation of riders dismantles the bleak and oppressive colonial history which the horse was originally associated with and restyles them as musicking companions at trail rides.

We can therefore conceive Creole trail rides as a form of antiracist mobility requiring riders to establish embodied relationships with their horses. Trail ride mobility thus becomes a spatial discourse that reveals the entanglements of people, horses, vital materialisms and sound on the move. In reference to the motor racing of African American driver Wendell Scott, Alderman and Inwood suggest that 'recognizing the ability of black bodies to engage in such assemblages and hybrid relationships ... and to transform these relationships into sites of antiracism, offers a picture of resistance as a set of sophisticated practices, subjectivities and connections' (2016: 608). I use this example because driving, like horse riding, can be understood as a profoundly embodied experience which requires a kind of 'metaphysical merger' of human and non-human (Katz 2000: 32). Thinking through the theoretical framework of creolization as a process of 'creation, invention, critique and resistance' (Cohen and Toninato 2010: 14), it is possible to understand how horses have become an integral part of this process, extending the notion of creolization to include a mingling of human subjects and cultures where the non-human becomes an integral actor to the maintenance and creation of this social world (cf Haraway 2008, Graham 2016, Kirksey & Helmreich 2010). The human-horse relationship becomes a kind of Creole relationship in light of this. This is neatly encapsulated by Game on human-horse relationships, 'we are always already part horse, and horses, part human; there is no such thing as pure horse or pure human … Through interconnectedness, through our

participation in the life of the world, humans are always forever mixed' (2010: 1).

Whilst horses have come to be associated with freedom and self-sufficiency, they have also been caught up in violent hierarchies of power and utilized to curtail the very freedoms that they have come to embody for some. One need only think of mounted police in urban American spaces, commonly seen in protest environments or mounted prison wardens in places like Louisiana State Penitentiary. The Louisiana State Penitentiary is also known as Angola which is a name taken directly from the historic Angola Plantation in whose place the prison now stands. Although Angola is no longer a plantation, Gillespie highlights 'the historical resonance of the plantation and embodied violence of plantation slavery is not hard to discern in the daily life at Angola where three-quarters of the prison population identify as black/African American' (2018: 1273). Men incarcerated in Angola toil in the fields of the prison farm all overseen by armed guards on horseback. These are just a few examples to highlight the often messy, entangled genealogies of race and species or 'dangerous crossings' as Claire Jean Kim (2015) calls them, where race, species and violence are caught up in taxonomies of power and exclusion.

HORSES VS PICKUP TRUCKS: COMMODITIES AND STATUS SYMBOLS

So far, I have considered how horses can be seen as companion species and co-beings on the zydeco trail, how they are important sources of cultural production and also entangled in actions of freedom and resistance. However, horses also arguably function as commodities and status symbols in what is a highly financial activity, therefore destabilizing ideas of non-human co-authorship and agency. Even though people perceive deep bonds and connections with their horses, Claire Jean Kim disputes such words as 'love', as in 'loving' one's animal, as a rationalization of dominance over those animals. 'With respect to animals, it is far too easy for us to confuse what feels good to us emotionally – becoming with, bonding with, communing with an animal, whatever language one chooses – with acting in such a way as to respect and honor that being in the fullness of his or her being, in the fullness of his or her needs, and interests' (2013: 472). As zydeco music evolves to incorporate



Figure 1.10 A GMC pickup truck at the Bayou Bash trail ride, Mamou LA. Source: Photo by author 2020

elements of rap and hip hop, the field and trail could be conceived as becoming the new 'hood' and the way that horses are entangled within this milieu may be changing as a result. With trail riding groups named such as *Rude Boyz Riders, Hip Hop Ghetto Riders, Blinged Out Riderz*, what could this suggest about people's relationship with horses?

In his 2013 hit 'Big Toyz', zydeco musician Chris Ardoin sings 'Country girls like them cowboys / with big old toyz / like Fords, Chevys and big old Dodges'.[25] What do lyrics like these imply about the place of the horse on the economic hierarchy? As Ardoin sings about the preferred pickup trucks deemed key to attracting the attentions of country girls, do horses enter the fray as companion species or as valuable commodities, like pickups or four wheelers, through which to accrue cultural capital amongst one's peers? One can't escape pickup trucks in Southwest Louisiana. They are deeply engrained in the rural culture of the American South, dominating the interstates and quiet country roads alike. Pull up at any zydeco dance and the parking lot will be full of them. The pickup also plays an important role in trail ride mobility and is a key presence at trail rides. They are an essential

[25] https://open.spotify.com/track/2TRpreXxFxEyQnOZ63EwRp?si=8b228c7462ba4d5e

accessory for pulling your horse trailer to the ride and also provide a way of participating if you do not have a horse, offering seating in the tail gate as they travel at a slow speed behind those on horseback.

The status stakes and cultural capital involved with owning a pickup truck are made clear to me while talking to Jarvis one Sunday under a white gazebo in the field by the IFBS Lodge near Leonville. It's mid-July 2019 and the heat index is pushing 40C. Jarvis is president of *Live @ 5 Ryders* trail ride group and since meeting him at the Rainbow Association trail ride season launch party at the start of the year, he had become a familiar and friendly face on the trail ride circuit. I'd technically met his truck before I met him. Arriving at the launch party at El Sid O's Zydeco and Blues bar, in Lafayette, I couldn't fail to notice his impossibly large white pickup parked right outside. The oversized wheels and rims were lit up by purple LEDs and his group's emblem of a rearing horse was laminated on the back screen of the cab.

Today Jarvis is sporting his group's emblem neatly shaved into the side of his head. We sit in folding chairs and he offers me a piece of Popeyes fried chicken from a box. The trail ride has already left but we are two of a handful of stragglers who, defeated by the heat, didn't roll out. The rest of his Live @ 5 Ryders are pulled up next to the gazebo in their own pickups, dozing in the welcome cool of their air conditioning. Jarvis is talking to me about the camaraderie found in playful competition at trail rides. 'This is about having a good time, riding your horses, showing your trucks off, listening to country music or zydeco or rap, whatever you feel at the time'. I wipe the sweat collecting on my nose and ask him if there's respect to be gained from driving a particular truck. 'It's not spoken of but yes Gwen. Actually, my truck and my other group member here', he gestures to the shiny red GMC parked behind us, 'we in an unspoken competition to make our trucks jacked up. He put tires on his, I put tires on mine. I put train horns on mine, he put them on his. It's a good competition, good and friendly, growing up like we are brothers and stuff. It's family!'. Echoing Ardoin's *Big Toyz* lyrics, Jarvis tells me I'd need to be pulling up in a GMC, Chevy, Dodge or Ford to turn heads. Jarvis's own GMC cost him in the region of $70,000. 'You could buy a house for that!' I remark and he chuckles.



Figure 1.11 Members of Live @ 5 Ryders in Jarvis' GMC pickup truck, Mamou LA. Source: Photo by author 2019

'I wish I would have. I added everything you see on that truck and put another $15,000 on those' he says pointing to his tires. He swigs from his bottle of Patron and rocks back in his chair before his attention is diverted to something happening over my right shoulder. 'Like right now I'm talking to you Gwen but I seen that truck pull up in my periphery. I'm thinking "that's a nice truck. Is his like mine? Is his better than mine?", I did a quick glance, see, and it is!'. He sighs, 'unspoken!'.[26]

With costs starting at $65,000 these pampered pick-up trucks won't be seen hauling hay, livestock or anywhere near mud. Cobb, writing on pickup culture of the American South, highlights that though pickups 'continue to have some practical applications in theory, in practice, a great number of them serve their owners primarily as "lifestyle vehicles" or some might even say "lifestyle statements"'

[26] Jarvis Bowie, discussion with author, Woodworth LA October 2019

(2018). Similar comparisons could be made about certain breeds of horses, whose ownership is arguably more about turning heads than fostering inter-species bonds. Explaining the difference to me between Walkers and Quarter Horses, one younger rider likened the Quarter Horse to a sturdy old truck and excitedly described a gaited horse as more like driving a racy Ferrari. The rise in popularity of smooth-gaited horses such as Tennessee Walkers and Saddlebreds has revealed not just a generational divide but to some extent a 'class' of rider. Older community members tend to dismiss some of the younger riders on the trail ride circuit as 'Sunday cowboys', lacking the experience, background and ethic that goes with the tradition. The Quarter Horse, deemed as a 'proper' work horse, becomes a signifier of a particular lifestyle and heritage. Back on his family farm, Shane explains to me:

> We came up working cows and really just a cowboy lifestyle so Quarter Horses is all we know. Plus, we never came up watching no gaited horses on the cowboy shows, so you know we don't know nothing about no gaited horses. Can't go catching no cows with no gaited horse.[27]

Shane pauses and reflects on what he has said, maybe considering the fact that many of his friends have opted for gaited breeds, and rephrases himself:

> Me personally, I like working cows so it's different for me. I can't work cows with a gaited horse like a Standardbred or Tennessee Walker. I'm a Quarter horse type of person because I can do those kinds of things and that's the kinda thing I love to do, work cows and stuff like that.[28]

For Shane, this is a fundamental issue with gaited horses. Unlike Quarter Horses, they aren't suitable to work cattle hence only being for 'weekend use'. Shane tells me how gaited horses are 'worked' in other ways i.e. for shows, races or for the trail ride circuit. To Shane, riding something like a Tennessee Walker requires much less skill. Since a gaited horse, after walking, has only one other gait, very little is required from the rider in learning how to move with the horse's other gaits. This

[27] Shane Boagni, interview by author, Opelousas LA, June 2019.
[28] Shane Boagni, interview by author, Opelousas LA, June 2019.

means entraining with your horse to establish the corporeal mutuality that so many riders talk of in terms of their relationships isn't necessary. Shane goes on:

> Gaited horses become popular a few years back. Like real popular. A lot of people didn't care for the bouncing around on the Quarter Horse, I guess they didn't take the time to become one with the horse and understand that you have to become one with your horse in order for you not be bouncing around and it give you a smooth ride once you become one with the horse. You'll see some people riding Tennessee walkers and it's just a smooth ride, it's just much easier for them to get on and just ride, and not even have to know how to ride a horse. A lot of people didn't really come up with horses so riding a Quarter Horse is hard for them if you didn't come up riding horse to understand that.[29]

Because of the smooth gait, Shane doesn't feel you can 'become one' with the horse in the same way he does with his Quarter Horses. His implication is that anyone can ride a gaited horse, without having to put in the necessary time to learn to move in synchrony with that horse, to embody their rhythm and create that sense of floating harmony that Game has described as 'becoming the centaur' (2001). Another benefit frequently cited as a reason to favour walking horses is that their gait is so smooth you won't spill your beer, making the horse appear more like a lifestyle statement than a valuable companion. There are also clear stylistic and trend implications of riding a smooth gaited horse. Riders of these gaited horses have become arbiters of style as they kick back and lean into their ride, looking totally effortless.

On a ride near Zachary in the Spring of 2019, I'm lucky enough to have been leant a horse for the afternoon. Her name is Yellow (or Yella) and she is a large tan Quarter Horse. It feels incredible to be in the saddle and to have a palpable sense of the comradery between the riders, a connection you don't quite grasp whilst participating from a wagon. As I ride alongside life-long trail rider Reggie, he laments how trail ride culture is drastically changing. He suggests the changing sound of zydeco is bringing in a crowd that aren't necessarily 'horse people'. Around that time, a group of young men

[29] Shane Boagni, interview by author, Opelousas LA, June 2019.

cruise by on Tennessee walking horses. It's an arresting image, the gait of their horses is smooth and the men's expressions nonchalant as they speed past, casually sat back in their saddles. Reggie looks unimpressed, dismissing them (like Shane does) as 'weekend cowboys'.[30]

Building on from Reggie's concerns, one could argue the growing popularity of trail riding is spurring a rise in horse ownership amongst those who want to take part. As articulated by Shane, with less skill needed to stay comfortably mounted on a gaited horse, breeds such as Tennessee Walkers offer a kind of fast-track option for those with little or no previous riding experience. Dashper, writing on horses as moral sentient beings, highlights that a horse is not just a piece of equipment in the same way as a boat is in rowing, or in this case a truck or ATV at the trail ride. 'Horses, as with all animals, have different personalities and horses will perform differently with different human partners' (2017: 6). This makes them vulnerable to becoming dispensable when things don't work out. Horses that do not live up to their human owner's expectations may be sold, illustrating the subordinate position of horse in the relationship. As outlined earlier in this chapter, the ultimate goal of many riders is to achieve 'one-ness' with their horse which is based on building a relationship of trust and respect over a long period of time. With horses selling for as little as $250 at the livestock auction in Opelousas, lasting meaningful relationships could be undermined by pressure on the horse to mould quickly with the rider.

Cassidy (2002) and Dashper (2014) have looked to British equestrian sport activities to explore how the changing nature of elite equestrian sport is altering the basis of the human-horse relationship. Cassidy (2002) explores bio-politics and ideologies of pedigree that are played out through the process of the sales when the horses are being treated as objects or commodities. In a similar vein, Dashper illustrates how horses within this arena have become high commodity values and although the relationship between horse and rider requires an assumed level of trust and respect, these relationships are often 'transactional, transient and instrumental' (2014: 2). She emphasizes on a more fundamental level how the changing role of the horse in human societies 'from a largely functional,

[30] Reggie, discussion with author, Baker, LA April 2019

work-based status to a status based more around sport, leisure, and consumption – has placed modern horses under new, potentially harmful demands to their performance and achievement in human pleasure' (2014: 8).

CONCLUSION

Trail riding provides a powerful lens through which to study human-equine relationships and their impact on social cohesion and collective identity within the trail ride nation. Weaving multispecies paradigms into the analysis of these relationships, I have tried to demonstrate the ways in which the zydeco trail rides of Southwest Louisiana are sustained through their participant's relationships with horses and how the intimate engagement riders have with their horses brings the trail ride into being.

With a focus on co-being and corporeal mutuality, I considered the emotional impact that participating in trail rides has on humans along with the powerful implications of synchronized group movement. I also explored the historical implications of the human-horse dyad in Southwest Louisiana, suggesting that equines have become protagonists in the creolization of trail riding as both a form of cultural expression and also an everyday 'emancipatory action' (Giancarlo 2017).

The Trail Ride Nation is a performance site of co-being, of transcendence and pleasure. Its citizenry enact and reclaim their self and their cultural identity as trail riders through their close connection with equines. Applying ideas of entrainment to understand trail riding as an 'integrated, embodied and interactive process' (Clayton, Sager and Will 2004: 2) between humans and non-humans, let me suggest that zydeco trail riding in Southwest Louisiana is also about embodied and sonic interactions with non-humans, about interspecies listening, sounding and dancing. This kind of sonic knowing is the enactment of a musical and embodied intimacy between humans and horses.

Birke and Latimer show how 'the meanings invested in horses and their use are diverse, multiple and contestable, reflecting some of the heterogeneity and complexity of contemporary Euro-American cultural life' (2009: 2). Competing pressures of status symbolism versus companionship make trail riding a complex arena for both horse and human participants. It also reveals the complexities and ambiguities in human relationships and their entanglements with non-human animals, and how the

socio-natural becomings of these relationships are themselves entangled in processes of racialization.

Chapter 2

ZYDECO NATION: MOBILE MUSIC AND ZYDECO BODIES

Now tell me what you gonna do when that beat coming down,

You said you did want to dance but don't you worry I'm gonna pass back around,

You don't have to worry now I can run a dance floor,

And I don't want nothing from you said I just want to zydeco,

I got that zydeco fever ah ah oh yeah

Lyrics from 'Zydeko Fever' by Chris Ardoin (2015)



Figure 2.1 The Bread Truck, Mamou LA. Source: Photo by author 2019

DJ Breadman is ready to go and everyone knows it. The engine of his old bread truck has gasped into life and is humming steadily as it waits parked at the entrance to the trail ride site. 'Eh, tell me what you wanna do! Come on! Let me see you do it' hollers Breadman through his loudspeakers. The opening accordion refrain of Beau Jocque & The Zydeco Hi-Roller's 'Hi-Rollers Theme / Low Rider' (1994) rumbles out and gathers pace. 'Alright now, you say you can do it, let me see you do it!' cries Breadman over the thumping track. 'Yeah cherie this is a mix. Mmmhmmm'. Breadman is booming the tunes before the ride has even started rolling out.

It's mid-July 2019 and I'm up near Mamou at the 'Rep Yo State Bayou Bash' ride hosted by Steady Steppin Riders. This particular trail ride draws riders and revellers from as far as Mississippi and Arkansas to compete in the halfway-point horse races. It is a big weekend in the trail ride calendar. You can't miss the 'bread truck' as it is called on the trail ride circuit – a boxy 1980s GMC Step Van adorned with faded decoupage photos of trail riders and their horses of decades gone by. The phrase 'mobile music' is painted across both sides of the van and a headshot of Breadman in his younger years is printed on the rear shutter, his contact number displayed beneath. It would turn heads on any day of the week but at the trail ride it has an extra surprise - the back shutter rolls up to reveal a hefty set of loudspeakers. With four more poking out of each of the two side windows, if you haven't seen the bread truck yet, then you've definitely heard it.

'Trail riders mount up!' a voice calls across the field, 'we riding out!'. There is a flurry of activity and commotion. Horses and their riders begin to assemble behind the bread truck. A colourful array of tan, black, chestnut and spotted coats blends with a sea of boots, jeans, caps and Stetsons. Whilst most riders favour western saddles, some ride bareback eschewing a sturdy leather cowboy boot for simple socks and sliders. Despite the seeming disarray to the scene – the horses, trucks, people – there is an unspoken and clear order to things. The bread truck pulls slowly out onto the main road, followed by the riders in its musical wake. Following behind them come the party wagons, then the ATVs and finally the trucks with passengers in their tail gates. I jump onto a flatbed trailer that pulls out just behind the line of horses and make a seat next to two young women who've driven all the way from the neighbouring state of Mississippi to join the event. They introduce themselves as K'Destiny and ReRe. They are sporting matching pink t-shirts with their trail ride group name 'Backwood

Princesses' neatly printed on the front. And on the back, the slogan: 'If you can't handle the sass, you can't handle this ass'. I'm handed a jello shot and a Bud Light and informed by K'Destiny 'it's time to get lit!'.

Our motely cavalcade rumbles down the country road. Music blares and the clop of what feels like a thousand hooves pound the cement in the bread truck's wake. The music coming from the bread truck's rear bass-speakers threads in and out of the bodies behind them, before dissipating further down the long line. As we proceed, the sound aligns us. Engines chug, truck horns beep, the atmosphere of raucous excitement and joy is both audible and palpable. The contrast with the surrounding landscape is stark. We pass a monotony of crawfish ponds, their water slick and still like oil, a perfect mirror of the impeccably blue sky above. Tall rice silos rise up further into the distance, piercing the endless blue. The summer air is pricklingly hot and close. The humidity clings to my skin. I am drenched in sweat, sound and dust. There is a pause in the music when Breadman changes his CD, allowing the basslines of some hip hop coming from a speaker further down the line to reach my ears. Before I can identify the track, Breadman comes back onto the speaker, this time spinning the hype in French Creole, 'Oh ouias tu connais quoi tu vas faire… ahhh fais pas ca boy!'. His MCing gives way to the R&B flavoured 'Zydeko Fever' (2015) by Chris Ardoin – an irresistibly up-tempo track with a driving beat and bluesy inflections played on the treble buttons of his accordion.[31] *Hips sway, feet stamp and our flatbed bounces like the floor of an old dancehall.*

INTRODUCTION

Part mobile festival and part dance party, zydeco music is an integral part of trail rides of Southwest Louisiana and Eastern Texas. From when the first truck rolls into the empty field, to the last one rolls out, music accompanies the trail ride event from start to finish. The rumble of engines, the clop of hundreds of hooves on the cement and the buzzy thud of musical bass lines create a thick network of vibrations in the dust and heat. Music is spread, intensifies and dissipates through a variety of

[31] https://open.spotify.com/track/6dP1PWgtAJOWA3b3Qa8R2u?si=4472f20ff97f4e45

mediums. It ripples through the site where the event is hosted, it carries the ride along the designated route and it erupts at the 'halfway point' when the length of the ride is suddenly compressed for an hour's stopover or 'rest'. Sound systems ensure there is no break in the pulse of the day. Whether perched on the tailgate of a truck, cable-tied to a party wagon or ratchet-strapped to a tractor, the role of the speaker providing music at a loud volume is imperative in organising the sonic body and space of the trail ride. In light of the transitory and mobile nature of trail rides, this chapter considers the sensual role of musical sound in constituting these temporary sites of assemblage. Leading the discussion with zydeco music and loudspeakers, I explore how Trail Ride Nation is created and sustained through a network of vibrations, questioning how music 'on the move' creates a material setting for celebration, groove and belonging. How can we understand the Trail Ride Nation as dynamically and extrinsically constituted through the vibrations of sounding? I will begin by talking about the inception of mobile music at trail rides. This will lead to a discussion about contemporary zydeco music and the rise of the 'low end'. In line with Henriques (2008), I'll be thinking through a spectrum of vibrating frequencies and their energetic affectation to explore how the body is reconfigured under the spell of this sonic event. How does music function an as 'intermaterial vibration' (Eidsheim 2015), aligning participants and keeping them in the groove? I will then assess the role of the DJ in nurturing a 'vibe', assessing the kinds of impact 'vibe' can have on participants of the ride. I illustrate how musical sound can work to build and negotiate senses of belonging and collective solidarity in the trail ride setting.

Considering its emergence within and against longstanding antiblack practises in Louisiana, I will also address how trail rides activate zydeco's complex history. I consider how mobile music can be understood as a rebellious wave form in the context of racialized public spaces. I ask, in what ways can we understand race to be 'audible' and how can music practices become a form of resistance for contemporary trail riders? Whilst vibrations impact bodies, move flesh and temper mood, I explore how they also 'interrupt the earth' in the words on one participant. Using theories related to 'Black Geographies' and McKittrick's (2006) notion that 'Black matters are spatial matters', I draw attention to how the concept of vibrations provides a way of analysing temporary spatial practices like parades, festivals or trail rides, within the specific context of the Americas. This opens up a meaningful way to

consider ‘how the politics of sound, and grooving to song, are assertions of black life that indict and subvert antiblackness and, at the same time, notice the inventive aspects of … difficult plantocratic histories, traces, and memories’ (McKittrick 2016: 91).

ZYDECO FEVER: MOBILE MUSIC & MATERIAL VIBRATIONS

It is early August 2020 and I’ve come to Church Point for the afternoon to visit with Frank Malbrough aka DJ Breadman, a trail ride mainstay since the 1980s. Whilst the rides run throughout the year, the threat of a tropical storm brewing in the Gulf of Mexico has cancelled this weekend’s schedule making it a good moment to catch up with the Breadman. My journey to Church Point has taken me west from Lafayette along the I10, weaving in and out of gargantuan haulage trucks before I cut north on the LA35. I always enjoy this route. As you get further away from the swamps of the Atchafalaya Basin, open prairie rolls out before your eyes. Root-entangled cypress trees give way to tall Scots pines that frame pastures and punctuate the flat horizon. Just north of the Rayne exit, Eunice-based radio station KBON comes into range and I drum my fingers on the steering wheel to early swamp pop and zydeco tunes.

Breadman’s house is set back from the road along a quiet street. I know I’ve come to the right place when I see the bread truck parked in the yard. It’s the first time I’ve encountered the truck so still and quiet. I knock on the front door and wait. A teenager, dressed casually in basketball shorts and sliders, trots by on a Tennessee walker. The echo of the horse’s hooves on the sidewalk ring out down the street. Then silence. Somewhere a dog starts to bark. I knock again, louder this time but there is still no response. I’m about to reach for my phone when a passing neighbour sees me waiting and hollers from across the street. ‘He’s not gonna hear you there *sha*[32]! Go knock round the back!’.

Breadman, ‘the Bread Man’ or just ‘Bread’ as he is also known, is without doubt a trail ride icon. As trail ride groups have come and gone, zydeco bands moved in and out of favour, Breadman and his truck have been a regular part of trail ride rhythm for almost four decades. He is by far the most

[32] Local term for ‘dear’. Probably derivation of French *Cherie.*

unique and longest running generator of mobile sound on the trail rides of Southwest Louisiana and Eastern Texas, usually booming tunes long before the ride has even started rolling. With his multidirectional speakers, he is easily the loudest source of music on the trail ride, generating a groove that engulfs anyone within a certain radius of the truck. As a king of mobile acoustics, his contribution has meant music on trail rides is now a requirement. He remains in high demand on the circuit and at almost 90 years old, shows no signs of slowing down.

'I changed the game baby!' he tells me gleefully as we sit in his yard in the dense summer humidity and talk about the inception of mobile music at trail rides. 'I invented the music on the trail ride with a turntable and 45" record'.[33] It was 1988. Rockin Sidney's album *Saturday Night Zydeco* was playing on the local radio with a Grammy nomination and Louisiana was reeling from an oil bust with the highest rates of unemployment in the country.[34] Breadman had just quit a regular gig DJing at a local night club when he was approached by a newly formed trail ride group to play at their ride. Music was already a feature of the fast-growing events but generally in the form of local zydeco musicians playing after the ride.

Breadman recalls that first trail ride clearly. On arrival, he'd set up his turntable and speakers as far into the field as the extension cord from the venue would reach and spun his 45s to the outdoor gathering. When the trail ride set off however, Breadman and his music were left behind. Determined to take his music on the road, someone bought a generator along to one of the following rides and Bread triumphantly rolled out with the rest of the riders, spinning his records along the way. It was a short-lived attempt as he explains:

> While we were going my turntable was just bouncing and bopping and breaking my needle on them bumpy roads, it messing up.[35]

The turntable could only play when the ride was not moving, so any moment the ride came to a halt people would jump off their horses and eagerly dance to the music. Whilst Bread was used to making

[33] Frank 'Breadman' Malbrough, interview by author, Church Point LA, July 2020
[34] https://open.spotify.com/album/301sWRgj6L7K6wYl8fqse6?si=io1FUsCbTL2p5ZGg76pp-Q
[35] Frank 'Breadman' Malbrough, interview by author, Church Point LA, July 2020



Figure 2.2 Frank Malbrough aka DJ Breadman, Church Point LA. Source: Photo by author 2020

people dance as a club DJ, in some ways he wasn't quite prepared for the enthusiastic response he got from trail riders as he grappled with his needle on those uneven country roads:

> When I'd stop they'd get off their horses and they wanted to dance. Well that wasn't supposed to be the plan: ride 'til your stopping point and after you get to your stopping point, play the music and then again on the way back… We had a problem with the dancing. They didn't want to stop dancing and they didn't want me to stop the music. They were more interested in the music than they were in the ride![36]

The 'stopping point' or 'halfway point' as it is known is a planned break in the ride. Usually scheduled halfway through the ride in a designated space, it allows the horses to rest whilst the riders socialise and dance. Instead of waiting for the stopping point however, the dancers Bread describes were dancing at any given moment that the music played. As if in the grips of some kind of feverish trance they did not want to stop.

[36] Frank 'Breadman' Malbrough, interview by author, Church Point LA, July 2020

Zydeco is first and foremost a dance music. As a mood it is celebratory, characterised by its notoriously infectious rhythm and accompanying partner dance. Peppy syncopated accordion lines and driving bass rhythms demand to be danced to. This is not unique to zydeco music – rhythm is after all, infamously 'infectious' (Browning 1998). The metaphor of contagion intersects with the growing body of work on 'affectivity', specifically in relation to sound and rhythm (Garcia 2020, Gallagher 2016, LaBelle 2018, McCormack 2008). This scholarship is particularly useful when considering the experiential qualities of sound on the body. It brings us to the notion that sound moves as 'a kind of affect – an oscillating difference, an intensity that moves bodies, a vibration physically pushing and pulling their material fabric' (Gallagher 2016: 43). But before exploring the affective quality of these vibrations further we need to return to Breadman and his turntable. At this stage in the story Breadman's vibrational reach was still confined to the moments of stasis when his needle could play the record without any disturbance. He had to find a different way to keep the tunes rolling and maintain the feeling of raucous energy and enjoyment whilst on the move. The solution came when his granddaughter was given a dual cassette boombox for Christmas from her father. The penny dropped for Bread, 'I said, I'm gonna catch them people who want to dance on the road' he tells me with a glint in his eye. The only issue now was that as a DJ who played from vinyl, he didn't have any cassettes. He enlisted the help of JJ Callier (father of zydeco musician JJ Callier III) who ran a zydeco and blues record store in Lafayette to create zydeco tapes for him to play:

> So he made me four cassette tapes. One for Boozoo Chavis, Wilford Chavis, Clifton Chenier and Rockin Dopsie. Four cassette tapes. Baby I burn them til the smoke was flying! I had them killing the grass girl. When they get up on Monday morning and go to clean up the area where they were dancing, all the grass was dead. Boombox connected to the amplifier. I could play loud so you couldn't understand my words but I always mellowed it down so you could hear me over the sound of the music… It excited all of us. I'd see the expressions on people's faces. They were excited too because it was something they had not experienced before.[37]

[37] Frank 'Breadman' Malbrough, interview by author, Church Point LA, July 2020

There was clearly no going back. Not only could people dance with their partners before or after the trail ride, they now had constant music during the ride so they could groove the whole way on horseback or dance on a wagon. Bread turned up the volume and played those tapes 'til the smoke was flying'. To use the words of McCormack, the affect was 'resonant, contagious and visceral' (2008: 1828). The intensity of the vibrations moving through the dancer's bodies had them literally 'killing the grass'. With such a visceral corporeal response, Bread wasn't going to stop there. When an old GMC truck was spotted for sale off a highway near Eunice, the idea was taken to the next level and the 'bread truck' was finally born. The truck's former service delivering Bunny Bread gave Frank Malbrough his new DJ name, Breadman.

The growing technology around sound accelerated the capacity for musical sound to cultivate the trail ride experience into a kind of sonic-spatial practice. The use of a record player, followed by a boombox and finally the bread truck not only took zydeco from stage to field, but also enabled the music to accompany the trail ride along the road. This creolization of technologies fundamentally shifted what started as a group horse-ride after church on Sundays, to an activity in which sound and vibrations became intrinsic. Bread is acutely aware of the impact that taking music on the rides had:

> Hey baby, you talk about rolling. My music was so outstanding to the people they would come and pass on my street, 'hey baby where you going next Sunday?'. It wasn't so much the trail ride but the music on the trail ride that generated people to come and learn how to dance the zydeco. And if you didn't know how to dance zydeco, then you dance what you knew. Whatever suit you.[38]

Bread credits the addition of mobile music at trail rides to their rising popularity. It was no longer just the activity of collective riding that was drawing people to the events but the music and with it, the associated zydeco dancing. At this point we've moved from the yard and into the truck. Despite the majority of the space being dominated by large loudspeakers, the interior has the warm and decorative feel of a domestic living room. A wooden framed clock with roman numerals hangs above the driving

[38] Frank 'Breadman' Malbrough, interview by author, Church Point LA, July 2020

seat window, the hands long stopped at 7:35. A sun faded curtain made of retro-looking fabric printed with a colourful variety of cowboy hats and interlacing rope hangs over a small window. Horse rosettes are pinned to the wall and an old cardigan hangs from a coat hanger. Behind the driving seat is a desk groaning under piles of CDs and assorted music equipment. This is where the magic happens. Bread takes a seat and fires up the sound. He flicks switches, adjusts levels on a Pyle stereo mixer and MCs with habitual ease. He starts playing a song by 'Mike Broussard and Nu Edition Zydeko' and turns around to grin at me. If you think the volume on the ride is loud, try being inside the actual truck. He quietens the music back down to talk me through his sound:

> I wanted to entertain everyone on the ride. So, a man made me a rack and I had two speakers to put on that rack in the front so that would give me some front sound, so I had enough sound to hit them people up on the front. And they would dance on the wagons… I wanted my sound to reach out to all of the riders, whether they were on a wagon or on horseback… On the wagons they might have ten people and that's why you want music, in order to catch all these people.[39]

Breadman's objective is to 'reach out' to everyone on the length of the ride and instil them with the same joy felt by those earlier dancers who had been 'killing the grass'. Kitted out with eleven hefty speakers ranging from bass cabs to horn-loaded compression drivers, his bread truck is a sonic mobile beacon setting the trail ride to a zydeco groove. To make sure he gets 360-degree sonic coverage there are speakers pointing in all directions. Eight stacked in the back, two poking out of each side window and two sitting on a rack at the front of the truck to 'hit the people up front' as Bread describes. The high intensity music blasts behind, around and ahead, drenching those close enough in zydeco. 'I wanna catch em all with my music' explains Bread, aiming to entertain everyone with his sound's enveloping materiality, whether they are dancing on a wagon or pacing along on horseback.

A distinctive feature of a trail ride is the volume of the music, which has undoubtedly got louder over the years with the help of innovations in sound technology. In order to 'catch' everyone on the

[39] Frank 'Breadman' Malbrough, interview by author, Church Point LA, July 2020



Figure 2.3 Horn-loaded compression driver and bass cabs in the Bread Truck, Mamou LA. Source: Photo by author 2019

ride, the sound needs to be kicked out at volume and also travel the furthest distance possible. Considering the truck is moving through flat open country where there are few reflective surfaces, this is not a straightforward task. Bread's extensive use of horn-loaded compression drivers allow the mid to high range of frequencies to travel further. Higher frequencies create shorter soundwaves than bass frequencies so the horn-loaded compression drivers gives the frequency a kind of running start, allowing it to reach a wider distance range. Horn-loaded compression drivers are generally used as sound reinforcement in outdoor concert venues and arenas, making them an ideal component to Breadman's rig. A pair of twin-loaded bass cabinet speakers in the back of the truck kick out the low-end thud of the bass frequencies and play a crucial role in Breadman's field of sounding (see Figure 2.3). The palpable vibrations coming from these bass cabs allow the music to be felt, not just heard. Breadman emphasises the physicality of his music when he talks of 'catching', 'reaching' and 'hitting' people with it. Here sound becomes something active that doesn't just arrive through the ears but is an embodied experience as illustrated by his feverish dancers.

The idea of the music needing to be 'felt' has become crucial to contemporary zydeco, which over the last three decades has evolved in tandem with the rise in use of large sound systems. Whilst the core instrumentation of zydeco bands has stayed relatively the same since Clifton Chenier's era in the 1950s, i.e. an accordion (though this has moved from a piano accordion to single row), a scrubboard, an electric guitar, a bass guitar and drum kit, DelGizzi highlights what has shifted are the 'valued aesthetics of the sound of these instruments' (2018: 7).

Michael Tisserand in his book *Kingdom of Zydeco* (1999) suggests this aesthetic shift in sound started in the mid 1980s when bass players like Classie Ballou Jnr., started blending modern RnB licks into their playing. Then in 1986 Buckwheat Zydeco's distinctly reggae-style 'Ya Ya', featuring bassist Lee Allen Zeno became a regional hit. 'It was a conscious attempt to do something sonically different, to draw out zydeco's parallels with Afro-Caribbean sounds' remembers 'Ya Ya' sessions producer Scott Billington (as cited in Tisserand 1999: 319). 'This lead us in the direction of shaping the low end of the record' (*ibid*: 319). When zydeco players emphasize bass and drums, Tisserand puts forward 'they are identifying themselves with larger trends in African-American music' (1999: 322). Musician Nathan Williams Jnr (or Lil Nate) is a regular on the trail ride bills of Southwest Louisiana and Eastern Texas and has a distinguished family history in the history of zydeco[40]. His popular tracks include the 2010 hit 'Bass in Yo Face' and 'Go Hard or Go Home' from his 2012 album 'Big Timer Nation'.[41] He highlights the significance of the bass drum in zydeco music:

> The bass drum carries the rhythmic portion of the low-end. Very important in zydeco music, very dominant in zydeco music… The low-end gives you that bump. It's almost like speakers in the trunk of a car, bumping rap music. When Beau Jocque was introduced to zydeco, that loud kick drum was introduced (as cited in DelGizzi 2018: 42).

Whilst different players and bands have added their own flavours and styles over the generations, it is

[40] Lil Nate's father, Nathan Williams leads the nationally touring band 'Nathan and the Zydeco Cha Chas' whilst his uncle Sid Williams (also an accordionist) founded El Sid O's Zydeco Blues Club - one of the last standing zydeco clubs in Lafayette. Whilst his father's music is very much influenced by the blues and older R&B of his generation, Lil Nate is geared to a more 'neo soul-type feel… with a lot of lead synths' (Williams as cited in Feintuch 2022: 247).

[41] https://open.spotify.com/album/47xjh7WE3VYTJbktN63KW5?si=TLUa90SaSDeJXivUa1g_ZA

widely acknowledged amongst contemporary zydeco musicians and aficionados that Beau Jocque arguably 'changed the game' when he came on the scene in the late 1980s with his 'hypnotic single row accordion riffs, couple with bass and drums amplified to the point of distortion' (Tisserand 1999: 319). Beau Jocque taught himself to play the accordion after a fall in a chemical plant left him temporarily unable to walk. During his recovery, he set out into the clubs to observe the crowds and see what kept them 'pumped'. He deduced that 'the young kids like the low–end' (Ardoin as cited in DelGizzi 2018: 9). His own resulting sound favoured hard beats and deep grooves with the use of large speakers and subs to bring the bass drum and bass to the front of the mix. I meet Beau Jocque's bassist Chucky Bush at a McDonald's on the Evangeline Thruway on the outskirts of Lafayette to talk further about that era:

> Beau Jocque used to give me a lot of solos because the bass never really shined in zydeco... He said 'break it down, break it down' and I'd go into Low Rider and everyone went nuts and we recorded it... I added in a bunch of funk licks from Bootsy Collins and other funk bass players and then it really caught on. The younger folks started coming… Beau Jocque wanted to have the best sound system out there. He was in good money, as a retired air force veteran. He tried to hire the best musicians at any cost, not just the best PA and that's how he sold himself.[42]

Beau Jocque had set a new bar with his sound system and sound mix and the younger crowds went wild. Herman Fusilier, presenter of the Zydeco Stomp on KRVS radio, recalls to me attending Beau Joque's concerts as a younger man:

> He really emphasised that low end. I can remember going to some of the dancehalls around then and the lights would dim because the music was so loud and the bottom on that bass was such a draw on the electricity. So, the lights would dim according to the rhythm of the music which was kinda funny to see but you knew what was going on. That became such a popular sound.[43]

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[42] Chucky Bush, interview by author, Lafayette LA, March 2019
[43] Herman Fusilier, interview by author, St Landry Parish, September 2019



Figure 2.4 Upping the speaker game: Mike Broussard and Nu Edition Zydeco sound check in Baker LA. Source: Photo by author 2019

As a result, everyone else playing the club and festival circuit had to up their loudspeaker game in order to stay competitive and meet the increasing hunger for that bass and forceful rhythmic drive. A kind of 'sonic warfare' ensued, where sound systems were competitively deployed 'in a war of mood, sensation and information' (Goodman 2009: 5). This approach to bass and sonic force has not changed, reflected by the hefty sound systems still used by musicians playing the circuit today. Two time Grammy nominated musician Sean Ardoin considers the 'felt' aspect crucial to Black music. 'Black music is bass heavy. Bottom heavy. If you don't have that bottom, you lose us, most of the time… You're talking about dance, gotta have that doo doo doo' (Ardoin as cited in Delgizzi 2018: 9). In discussion with him at his studio in Lake Charles Sean explains to me that these bass lines are literally the heartbeat of zydeco music:

> It's like hearing reggae music when you can't hear the bass and you can't feel the bass and bass drum. Same thing with zydeco. Bass and bass drum, if you can't hear that, it's something

else.[44]

This idea is reinforced by Nathan Williams who maintains zydeco is a dance music: 'It's all about the beat... because no matter how simplistic your verses are, your lyrics, your accordion line, no matter how monotonous your bassline is, they want to dance' (Williams as cited in DelGizzi 2018: 8*).*

ZYDECO BODIES

A material notion of the affective power of sound intersects with scholarship on other dance musics emerging from the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) which centralise the importance of bass frequencies that impact flesh and move bodies. Julian Henriques writing on Jamaican Dancehall for example, uses the term 'sonic dominance' to describe such 'immersive liminal intensities of sound, experienced as the sheer weight, force, and substantive presence of the sounding of the session' (2008: 221). Henriques suggests 'listening here depends not only on the ears but the entire haptic sensory skin surface of the body' (*ibid:* 221). The clamour for this sonic dominance is only too evident at trail rides as people ride up as close as possible to the bread truck's speakers for that immersive whole-body experience, or dance in front of the band's sound system at the post-ride concert where the thud of the bass speakers is so resoundingly loud and forceful that it ripples through to your core. Your heart flutters and you forget how to breath as your body makes sense of the penetrating groove, leaving you no choice but to become the sound and let it move you. I'd now like to consider the affective potentials of musical sound and sonic dominance. How are trail ride bodies – human and non-human – transformed in relation to sound and rhythm? How can we understand sound as an 'intermaterial vibration' (Eidsheim 2015) in these settings?

With sonically dominant bass lines and that all-important visceral beat, the zydeco trail ride is far more than an auditory experience. It assaults, provokes and stimulates a range of bodily senses. Whether grooving on a party wagon, on a horse's back or stuck in a sound clash between different loudspeakers, the over-arching feeling is one of total encompassment. Steven Connor (2001)

[44] Sean Ardoin, interview by author, Lake Charles LA, September 2019

understands the senses as 'multiply related' and that we rarely make sense of the world around us through one sense alone. The core of musical perception is rooted in the sensuous – that which is heard and also felt. As Connor notes, one of the most important features of human hearing 'is that it seems incomplete and interrogative; hearing provides intensity without specificity, which is why is has often been thought to be aligned more closely with feeling that with understanding' (2001: para 5). To be surrounded by sound, as Connor argues, 'is to be touched or moved by it' (*ibid*: para 1). Paul Gilroy is similarly certain that the interaction between the body and musical sound goes 'against the limited idea that we encounter sound only, or even mainly through our capacity to hear and make interpretative sense of it' (2003: 390). Thinking through the physical inscription of sound in matter Gilroy suggests we should not 'approach organized sound as an exclusively cognitive problem' (*ibid*: 390). For Gilroy, the body is both an object and an agent and it remains unclear 'how musical sounds act upon it at various volumes' (*ibid:* 390).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notions of embodiment are particularly resonant when discussing the inherent physicality and intersensorial nature of music. Working against the idea of the Cartesian divide, Merleau-Ponty understood the mind and body as unified through the process of perception and what he termed the '*lived body'*. He states, 'my perception is therefore not a sum of visual, tactile and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being; I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once (2002: 50). The trail ride is an immersive corporeal experience, undoubtedly made more potent by the presence of music. Without the likes of Bread and other sound providers the trail ride would be a very different event. 'Ain't no trail ride if there's no music!' people often tell me when I ask what they feel the most important component of a trail ride is. This sentiment is similarly expressed to me by Ashley, president of Texas based trail ride group 'Texas Regulators'.

> It's like a melting pot almost. You can't name one thing that creates all those things for the soul. It's all those things intertwined with one another and then it makes the bigger masterpiece. The music is the soul of it. For me, zydeco is my favourite part of it. I'm also a horse lover, I love to see the horses. The fellowship, we are partyers. We like to have a good

time. And that's a big element, having a good time and with that, the fellowship.[45]

Ashley captures the hybrid and creolized nature of the trail ride as a celebratory entanglement of music, humans and horses. 'We are partyers' she says and all good parties need music. Describing music as the 'soul' of the event reinforces the notion that music and vibrations are key components of trail ride infrastructure. Zydeco becomes an aligning thread to these mobile, energetic events. It is the soul element in an entire assemblage or 'masterpiece' in Ashley's words, that builds the trail ride as a space of fellowship and pleasure. The compelling vibrational force of the music along with 'the rush of emotion and empathy' (Wang 2015: 15) beckons people to the weekly rides and trail ride dancefloors. Returning to Henriques and his work on Dancehall music, 'evidently sound moves as an affect, not only mechanically as an auditory vibration, or physically as the circulation of a recording. Sound moves people to feel that they have a connection with other people and other places' (*ibid*: 2008). By extension sound also moves people to feel they have a connection to other beings i.e. non-humans. As explored in my previous chapter the presence of music on the trail ride drastically shapes participant's perspectives on their relationships with their horses, to the extent that horses become dance partners and beat-makers along the trail. Whilst there may be few reflective surfaces in the open space for the musical sound, there are plenty of receptive bodies. Sound as vibrant or vibrational matter does not discriminate, it touches (or 'catches' in the words of DJ Breadman) all surfaces – human bodies, equine bodies, mechanical bodies – and dissipates through them. Merleau Ponty argues that our perception makes us both object and subject at the same time. He uses the concept of 'reversibility' to explain 'our existence as a reciprocal interaction with the world. The reciprocal quality of the interaction demonstrates the state of being both subject (one who is touching) and object (one who is being touched) in rapid succession, inspiring the term reversibility' (Corness 2008: 21). Merleau-Ponty proposes the phenomenon of touch is a site of reciprocity in which subject/object perception becomes indeterminate. The sensual dimensions of the trail ride are thus reversible and not purely a unidirectional flow of sound to bodies. Touched by (received) or caught by implies an

[45] Ashley Lewis, interview with author, Church Point LA, April 2019

absorbing and then re-emitting of vibrations resulting in embodied interaction and moments of synchrony.

The loud zydeco bass beats coming from the bread truck set the tempo for the heart and body beats of the crowd, the equine beats on the cement roads follow suit. Riders entrain with their horses who in turn fall in step with the syncopated zydeco beat creating moments of perfect rhythmic alignment and intercorporeal synchrony. In my first chapter I discussed how applying ideas of entrainment can help us understand trail riding as an 'integrated, embodied and interactive process' (Clayton, Sager and Will 2004: 2) between the triad of humans, horses and zydeco. Within the context of musical entrainment, Krueger has used the term 'affective synchrony' to refer to 'the pleasure we take simply moving our bodies in time with the music, letting musical rhythms (and the movements they solicit) draw certain felt responses out of us – and, when others are present, the pleasure we take in sharing this process' (2014: 3). Thinking about vibrations and moments of alignment, we arrive at the notion that there is solidarity in synchrony, compounded by McNeill's work on 'muscular bonding' (1995) and Keil and Feld's being 'in the groove together' (1994: 197) as discussed in chapter one.

Through her theory of 'intermaterial vibration', Nina Eidsheim directs us away from thinking about sound and music as a sum of fixed parts, to thinking of them as 'transferable energy' that pulsates 'through and across material and transforming as it adapts to and takes on various material qualities' (2015: 16). Like Jane Bennett and her theory of a 'vital materiality', Eidsheim is concerned with the 'material relationships between humans and things, for which the practice of vibration is both metaphor and concrete manifestation' (*ibid*: 16). Eidsheim challenges us to think beyond sound as 'bounded and knowable, with a distinct beginning and end' and instead to 'see the same phenomenon as vibration and understand it in the terms of the energy in a body's mass and its transmission, transduction, and transformation through different materials' (*ibid*: 16-17). In alignment with much of this scholarship, Brandon LaBelle posits 'sound as an intensity that moves objects and bodies into the world, extending their reach and relation, is a force that works to link across singularities' (*ibid*: 61). With a focus on music in social spaces, LaBelle proposes that sound may act as a path for the expression of passion and ecstasy. As a vibratory matter, sound threads in and out of bodies, traversing spaces to align and link, to interrupt and fragment, 'a type of rhythming found in the call

and response of community, in the beats that beat back against and for another' (LaBelle 2018). LaBelle sees sound as 'a powerful force from which we learn of the entanglement of worldly contact, one that extends from the depths of bodies and into energies of social formations and their politics' (2018: 7). Here the human body is unsettled as a defining figure and instead is placed within 'a field of life-forces from which alliances, conflicts and interminglings … are continually at play, from body to body, species to species, thing to thing (*ibid*: 61).

The work of Eidsheim, LaBelle and Bennett helps us to think of sound in the trail ride setting as a shifting and energetic vibration in its capacity to enable an 'animate flow to pass between bodies and things' (Labelle 2018: 61). The bread truck solidifies temporal spatial belongings through its rhythmic invitation to join the nation, to enact a collective 'zydeco body' on the trail ride by the way participant bodies are captured by the sound that pulses through them. Trucks roll, horses bounce and people groove as the flow of the bread truck creates a rhythm, vibe and speed for all to move to. These bodies are the anatomy of the trail ride. Rhythm and vibrations thus give intercorporeal coherence to the unfolding event, 'assembling together networks of human and non-human actors into a feeling and knowing 'sonic body'' (Garcia 2020: 26). The 'corporeal vibrations' (Henriques 2008) resonating from dancing fleshy bodies, sweaty horses and rumbling engines create a dynamic, shared social space as the crowd come together as one sonic zydeco body snaking through Southwest Louisiana. These corporeal vibrations resonate with the material vibrations and bass frequencies propagated by sound systems. Listening to the beats and grooves of Black music, as Silvia Wynter puts forward, fosters collective 'cosmic unity' between the self and social body: people 'listening or dancing participate in the experience of the music (and are) linked to the physiological experience of the beat' (as cited in Mckittrick 2016: 90). We are reminded of the vitality and affective capacity of sound in its ability to constitute the trail ride's vibrant ensemble of human, animal and mechanical bodies at the trail ride. Mobile sound energises and carries bodies and these bodies in turn absorb and carry the sound, moving people to feel they are connected with others. Bodies, sound and by extension 'vibe' (which will be discussed in my next section) are continually co-constructing each other.



Figure 2.5 Mobile sound in the form of speakers strapped to a four-wheeler, LeBeau LA. Source: Photo by author 2019

'ISSA CELEBRATION':[46] DJS, VIBES & THE HALFWAY POINT

Being a DJ, Breadman is acutely aware of the importance of cultivating a 'vibe' as the trail ride moves through rural Southwest Louisiana. His aim is to 'catch' and 'reach' all with his encompassing zydeco embrace. These days DJ Breadman is just one of a number of mobile DJs and MCs on the trail ride who play a vital role in constructing an atmospheric space of inclusivity and fellowship. Whether they are DJing from laptops on party wagons, MCing from the back of tractors or rolling the tunes from a CD player rigged to a PA, all the DJs share the same mission and that is to keep the trail ride 'moving', to keep the vibe 'up there'. Through their use of loudspeakers, they sustain an ongoing beat and in doing so 'generate particular 'sound spaces' or 'sound communities' for the individuals involved' (Duffy, Wait & Gibson 2007: 7). I'd now like to consider the relationship between musical sound and the creation of a 'vibe' or 'atmosphere'. How does this intersect with the generation of

[46] Title of a Chris Ardoin song (2018)

community?

As the president of a trail ride group who organises a hugely popular annual three-day event, Ashley is also aware of the importance of creating a 'vibe'. To talk about this further I'm back in Church Point but this time in the yard of Ashley's uncle Anthony. It's Easter Saturday and the family are hosting a party and crawfish boil to celebrate. Neighbours, friends and family spill out under gazebos around the garden. There is a bouncy castle for the kids and the happy thrum of chatter and music fills the air. On arrival, I'm ushered in and immediately sent to see 'Tony' who hands me a Styrofoam box heavy with steaming crawfish and boiled corn.

Just two weeks before Ashley's trail ride group The Texas Regulators had thrown their annual ride in Cheek, Texas where I'd watched Ashley and her dedicated predominantly female-led team put together a whole weekend of entertainment. As a trail ride group, you are not just a social family but also event organisers and promoters curating large scale annual trail rides with big budgets. The rustic outdoor nature of these occasions belies the amount of thought and organisation that goes into their crafting. Administrative tangibles such as applying for permits, booking bands and security aside, Ashley holds such intangibles as creating 'vibe' and 'atmosphere' as crucial to throwing a successful ride:

> All the elements combined together – the music, the artists, the DJs, play a big part too. MCs help to create the vibe and atmosphere. We use one particular MC and his antics to create the vibe are hilarious. It's just his way of keeping the crowd in tune and keeping everyone rocking to the beat. When you have folks drinking, possible altercations, MC's help the DJs to sway the music to help sway the crowd and atmosphere from a hostile stand point to everyone back on the same page enjoying ourselves[47].

Ashley describes the DJs ability to unite the crowd through his 'vibe' as keeping them 'in tune'. Through sound one can come to feel 'in tune' with the rest of the audience. This account of vibratory

[47] Ashley Lewis, interview with author, Church Point LA, April 2019



Figure 2.6 A DJ / MC on a party wagon, Ville Platte LA. Source: Photo by author 2015

affectivity frames the trail ride as a space of 'social, sonic, and affective *attunement* – that is, of coming into (or falling out of) 'sync' or entrainment' (Garcia 2020: 30). 'There are those 'Utopian' moments on the dancefloor, where the sound and rhythm becomes an affective glue, bringing together dancing bodies' (Biddle & Thompson 2013:11). Whilst violence is far from a defining feature of the trail ride, as with any crowded situations of late night drinking and partying, Ashley acknowledges altercations are a possibility. In addition to keeping everyone 'rocking to the beat', she illustrates the role of the MC and DJ is to also disperse any feelings of tension by using music to 'sway the crowd'. The DJ and crowd 'exist in a feedback loop, whereby the DJ's track selections shape the mood of the crowd, while the mood of the crowd shaped the DJ's track selections' (*ibid*: 11). The task of the DJ as a kind of community mediator is discussed by Oliver Wang in his work *Legions of Boom* (2015) which chronicles Filipino American mobile DJ crews in the Bay Area. Wang understands DJing as 'an inherently social act, where "building community" is not accidental but deliberate and necessary'

(*ibid*: 12):

> In a delicate and symbiotic relationship, DJs and dancers nurture a "vibe", by which I mean a mix of forces, both tangible and invisible, that create pleasurable, memorable experience or bring down the mood of an entire crowd (*ibid*: 13).

The vibe 'mediates the emotional qualities of a dance floor experience, which in turn helps create and reinforce shared group identities and values in those moments' (*ibid*: 13). Reflecting on the emotional aspect of the trail ride experience, Shane, president of trail ride group Barn Yard Posse, differentiates trail ride vibes from club vibes:

> It's about how good it feels and how people treat one another. It's different from any other club you might go into. Like in a club you might bump into someone and they might get offended or might have a conflict. With the trail ride, people are really there just enjoying themselves no matter what's going on. They really just come out to enjoy themselves, vibing, speaking, get to know one another. It's like a family. People just wanna see one another happy and enjoying themselves.[48]

'Vibe' is the felt aspect in these mileus, that is 'the ambiance, atmosphere and feelings generated' (Henriques 2008: 226) in and by the trail ride. Henriques has termed these kinds of vibes as 'ethereal vibrations' which concern 'listening, rather than hearing with which corporeal vibrations are occupied' (*ibid*: 226). Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes, Henriques distinguishes *hearing* as a physiological phenomenon whilst *listening* is a psychological act. Henriques points out ethereal 'vibes' are 'built from the crowd's knowledge, understanding, appreciation, sensitivity and expectation... Each crowd member has their tastes, loyalties, memories, associations and expectations depending on selectors on the bill, sound system, venue and so on' (*ibid*: 227). This is much like trail ride groups with their own personal affiliations and relationships with certain zydeco musicians and DJs. There is also a loyal system of mutual support within trail ride circles, a strict moral code of 'if you come to my ride, I come to yours'. Back at the yard party in Church Point we continue peeling

[48] Shane Boagni, interview by author, Opelousas LA, June 2019

crawfish and Ashley talks further about expectations for her own ride and the importance of their 'turned up' vibe:

> So, the vibe, the aura and the atmosphere that you have, it's hard to describe, but it has to be up there. I've always been proud because our vibe for our ride has always replicated who we are – turned up and high energy all the time. In our tent, the bands are bringing high energy, its non-stop. It's factoring in the show doesn't stop and everything keeps moving.[49]

Ashley describes the 'vibe' and atmosphere as defining features of not just her annual trail ride but also her group's identity. The notion of the show not stopping suggests a constant flow of music and movement throughout the day keeping the energy and atmosphere sustained. From pulling up in trucks to pulling out on horses or the finale concert, there are DJs from start to finish.

Whilst zydeco is a framing feature of trail rides in Southwest Louisiana, plenty of other music is celebrated and played during the course of the day that is not just coming from the likes of DJ Breadman. Rap, hip hop and increasingly bounce music, a form of New Orleans hip hop popularised by queer and non-binary artists and MCs, will also be blasting from speakers on party wagons belonging to various trail ride groups or on the tailgates of trucks (see Figure 2.6). Some trail rides can stretch hundreds of meters in length. Party wagons will more often than not have their own sound systems and DJs, making space for different tastes to be heard and as Boyo says, to 'let the kids do their thing'. By 'sound systems', in line with Quintero, I mean 'in one sense the technological apparatus for amplifying sound' but also 'that each of these scenes – with its linked chains of sounding and listening agents and technologies of sounding – is a system of sorts' (2019: 136). These scenes are compressed at the half-way point where they blend into an amorphous collage. The half-way point (or stopping-point as it is also referred to) is an event unto itself. The entire length of the trail ride spills into a pre-chosen site – usually a field – and the horses, party wagons and trucks fan out to fill the new space. Food is shared or sold from BBQs on trucks or wagons whilst the horses rest. The halfway point is far more than an opportunity for rest and nourishment though and is a

[49] Ashley Lewis, interview with author, Church Point LA, April 2019

highly evocative and symbolic punctuation in the trail ride ritual. It is a visual and sonic compression point, a moment of intensification as music from the motley collection of speakers on party wagons and trucks booms out across the immersive space. Ashely conjures the vibe:

> The halfway point is technically for rest but its where the party really happens. I've had my best times at the halfway point simply because you're getting off horses, you're mingling, you're networking, meeting new people. You have people on wagons who are cooking and offering you food. It's like a big family reunion with people you don't necessarily know, as weird as it sounds. You see the wagons rocking and here is where the battle begins. We have the krunkest party wagons competition so you know here is where they begin with the dancing, the getting krunk, the shuffles getting off the wagon, it's just beautiful. It's beautiful to see all the different coloured shirts, intertwining with one another, talking, taking pictures.[50]

Ashley's description of the halfway point captures the vibrant and celebratory assemblage of entangled sonic bodies as they mingle, dance and shuffle. The idea of it being a 'big family reunion with people you don't necessarily know' summons Benedict Anderson's notion of the 'imagined community' (2006), confirming that despite not all necessarily being acquainted, here at the trail ride they are all family. Family, fellowship, comradery were all words used frequently when discussing with research participants the overarching feelings stirred by attending trail rides. This is particularly pertinent when one considers the trail ride is not rooted to a specific site but instead is a mobile convoy inhabiting multiple spaces as it moves through the countryside before bursting into a field for the halfway point. Using the words of Henriques, the halfway point could be seen to promote 'an energetic transmission of affect, as well as one of spatial and temporal connection', leading us to conclude that the 'material bass beat and corporeal heartbeat of the bass-line embodied through ethereal vibrations, builds nothing less than a nation state of the musical imagination' (*ibid*: 229). The halfway point provides a key moment of convergence, an opportunity to see Trail Ride Nation out in

[50] Ashley Lewis, interview with author, Church Point LA, April 2019



Figure 2.7 The halfway point at the Westside Riders annual trail ride, Mamou LA. Source: Photo by Author 2015

full spectrum with all the intertwining group shirts, all the different fleshy and mechanical bodies. Ashley compares the halfway point with the end of ride concert:

> Its constantly moving, people intertwining etc versus the dance which is still moving but is so still, which is ironic, everyone is still except for the dancers and musicians. It's a moving still image versus the halfway point which is a constant movement of people, horses and ATVs. People are able to network because you don't have the fixated loud sound of the band grabbing your attention. We have the attention of this person or that person. Who's playing that song? I don't like that song, let me go over here and listen to some southern soul at this wagon or maybe I'll go over here for some hip hop, or I wanna shake-it they playing bounce over there.[51] To me the halfway point is the most beautiful thing in terms of imagery of the

[51] Described by Lauron Keher as a 'dance-centric hip hop genre' (2022: 95), bounce was born in New Orleans and has predominantly been led by queer and trans rappers from the city. The chants and dance call outs in bounce music are typically rapped out over two looped beats - the 'Triggerman Beat', sampled from the song 'Drag Rap' by New York City group The Showboys (1986), and 'Brown Beats' (1987) by DJ Cameron Paul. Bounce music, with its openly gay or trans rappers, may appear a surprising development in the context of a

ride because you get to see it come full spectrum.[52]

Despite being a designated moment of stasis, the flow of the day continues. The halfway point is a moment of physical convergence but also offers a juncture of divergence. People allow themselves to be moved by the different musical sounds in the air and by what is grabbing their attention. They are simultaneously at one with the group, the 'family reunion' as Ashely describes, but also drawn by their individual subjective needs and tastes. What radiates from the halfway point are not only the material vibrations of the sound blasting from a plethora of different party wagons, the corporeal vibrations of the twerks, shuffles and two steps, but also the ambient and ethereal vibes cultivated by the DJs not to mention the word of mouth on the next ride. The 'vibe' in these contexts is 'primarily metaphorical, indicating mood, atmosphere, collective feeling, and personal disposition' (Garcia 2020: 27).

I'd now like to consider the more spatial implications of trail ride vibrations. What is the 'earthly' impact of this collective assemblage as it moves through Louisiana? How can we understand musical sound on the trail ride as a 'rebellious' wave form (McKittrick 2016) in the context of the racialized South? Similarly, how does zydeco and the practise of trail riding help create alternative narratives of the Louisiana countryside?

KICKING UP THE DUST AND THE SONICS OF SANCTUARY

On an overcast Sunday in November 2019, I drive the 200km west along the 1-10 to Beaumont, Texas to talk further to Ashley and some of her trail ride group Texas Regulators – a team of brilliant and spirited women running one the most anticipated rides in the calendar. All being women of similar ages we soon become firm friends and our time together extends beyond trail rides to family gatherings and shared meals. I stop on route at Billy's Boudin and Cracklin in Scott to pick up some of their famous smoked boudin and the smell of the steaming sausages fills my Subaru as I continue

zydeco trail ride, where the performing zydeco musicians are historically hyper-masculine and cisgendered males, but it reflects the diverse and changing tastes of a newer generation of riders.

[52] Ashley Lewis, interview with author, Church Point LA, April 2019



Figure 2.8 The Texas Regulators, Cheek TX. Source: Photo by author 2022

on my way. This stretch of the I-10 is now familiar to me having crossed into Texas regularly for previous trail rides. Somehow the journey *to* the ride becomes as much a part of the experience as the rides themselves. After you cross the Sabine river on the approach to Beaumont, the expansive chimney stacks and distillation towers of the Exxon Mobil oil refinery make for their own skyline, a ghost city of twinkling lights and billowing smoke. Once over state lines, the radio station crackles and morphs from Cajun two-steps into the accordion polkas of Tex-Mex conjunto. I pass strip mall after strip mall, a repetitive blur of Best Westerns, Taco Bells and Waffle Houses, before finally coming off the interstate to drive through the leafy oak-lined suburbs of Beaumont to reach Ashley's apartment. The boudin is passed around and we settle into the living room as Ashley recounts a childhood memory about zydeco:

> All sides of my family are from Louisiana. For the zydeco side of things, it's where we get deep, we talk about generations back. I can recall being in my grandmother's front yard in Kelly Street, Church Point Louisiana, and seeing dust clouds fly up. Huge dust clouds. It was

> my great aunts and uncles zydecoing. And I'm a small child just like, 'wow look at all the dust'. I thought they were making magic, ironically, seeing the dust clouds billow up into the air because of their foot work. I was like wow that's magical, I had to learn it. That's how zydeco really started for me and has been a way of life, along with trail riding. It's all I know.[53]

Ashley recalls standing spellbound at the 'magic' they are conjuring with their dancing. Her entire frame of reference for zydeco from that moment on comes from this memory of her family kicking up the dust. Zydeco becomes entangled with notions of earth, movement and ancestry. To return to Gallagher and sonic affect, he suggests what begins as 'a flow of raw vibration may produce sensations, emotions or moods, or push through into the realm of significance to be heard as anything from slight hints of something, evoked memories, associations or senses of space, through to more formal meanings and representations, as spoken in language' (2016: 44). Gallagher recognises sonic affects may accumulate 'layers of significance' over time. Ashley goes on:

> It takes on a sort of, to see the dust kicked up, you are interrupting the earth, it's phenomenal. How you portray that image and what it really means to portray that image. See my aunts and uncles, my great aunts and uncles and my grandmother, when my ancestors kick up the dust on zydeco, zydecoing just in the front yard and it resonates seeing the horses kick up the dust as they ride past me. So much imagery surrounding that one particular focus. We're kicking up the dust, we're making moves, so yeah seeing that dust pass through the headlights of cars, or dust in your hair.[54]

For Ashley, dancing or 'kicking up the dust', brings webs of connections between the triad of music, the human body and horses. Zydeco is not just heard and felt but also *seen* as the earth is unsettled by dancing feet and pounding hooves. Trail riders kick up the dust just like her ancestor's feet. The affective quality of trail ride space is a potent and visceral mix of music reverberating through dancing bodies, 'interrupting the earth'. I am reminded of Breadman describing the feverish dancers

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[53] Ashley Lewis, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019
[54] Ashley Lewis, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019



Figure 2.9 'Kicking up the dust' at a trail ride in Opelousas LA. Source: Photo by Phil Clarke Hill with permission 2016

'killing the grass' as their feet left their mark on the ground.

Ashley's poetic description resonates with the scholarship of Black Geographies which seek to highlight Black agency in the production of space, 'as well as alternative visions and articulations of space drawn from these experiences' (Allen, Lawhon & Pierce 2019: 1002). Katherine McKittrick holds that 'Black matters are spatial matters' ((2006: xii), outlining the need for a study of Black practises through the language of space and landscape. Black geographies therefore provide an opportunity for 'a focus on affirmative black identities and affirmative black geographies that celebrate black life even as black communities resist a racist society' (Allen, Lawhon & Pierce 2019: 1004). The trail ride moves through space, filling the road, being heard and 'interrupting the earth'. As a vibrational assemblage, the ride can span more than a kilometre in length – a long chain of sound systems sending musical sound in all directions. In the context of the exclusionary and racialized environment of the American South, the nature of a trail ride 'allows for increased visibility and powerful collective presence (hooves clacking, music playing) of a group that otherwise occupy the

(figurative) margins' (Giancarlo 2016: 229). Ashley's notion of 'interrupting the earth' also speaks to the gendered nature of trail riding. The Texas Regulators, as a female-lead trail ride group are an exception in a scene which is dominated by men. For example, there is currently only one female musician playing on the trail ride circuit (Jennifer Frank plays bass for her brother Keith Frank), many of the trail ride groups are male-led and men tend to make up the majority of those on horseback. 'Women, for the most part have been held behind men, in this culture and in life' Ashley tells me. 'When you see women hold their own, it's a power move and I love it'. Recognising the local and wider scale issue of women's marginalisation, the Texas Regulators celebrate a hyper-visible and hyper-sonic Black female presence as they move through the landscape with horses, trucks and sound-systems 'disrupting the surrounding peace' in Ashley's words.

Gayle Wald uses the concept of vibrations (both physical and metaphysical) to discuss how Black artists and audiences have 'used music to critique an America prone to silencing black artists and erasing black presence' (2011: 674). Wald attempts to think about 'sound as an instrument of oppositional consciousness, particularly in relation to struggles over space' (*ibid*: 674), pursuing the idea that there is 'something powerful in the act of registering and projecting a collective presence though sound' (*ibid*: 675). In a similar vein, Labelle's notion of 'sonic agency' considers 'how particular subjects and bodies, individuals and collectives creatively negotiate systems of domination, gaining momentum and guidance through listening and being heard, sounding and unsounding particular acoustics of assembly and resistance' (2018: 4). Sonic agency becomes a framework for empowering political subjectivity, a support structure for empowering emancipatory practises and 'collective solidarities formed through vibration and reverberation' (*ibid*: 60). Reflecting on Sylvia Wynter's monograph 'Black Metamorphosis' and her discussion of musical beats, McKittrick thinks about Black waveforms as 'rebellious enthusiasms':

> I focus on waveforms to draw attention to the ways an ungraspable resonance – sound – allows us to think about how loving and sharing and hearing and listening and grooving to black music is a rebellious political act that is entwined with neurological pleasure and the melodic pronouncement of black life (2016: 81).

Discussions of vibrations and sonic agency provide a way of analysing temporary spatial practices



Figure 2.10 A 'rebellious enthusiasm'. The Riders R Die trail ride group dance on the roof of a pickup truck at the Texas Regulator trail ride, Cheek TX. Source: Photo by author 2022.

like parades, festivals or trail rides, within the specific context of the Americas and the violent matrix of the middle passage and slavery. In this respect, Creole enactments can be 'subversive social and political tools' (Baron and Cara 2003: 5) in their ability to 'transform and criticize the heritage of colonization in the New World' (Chivallon 2008: 35). This opens up a meaningful way to consider 'how the politics of sound, and grooving to song, are assertions of black life that indict and subvert antiblackness and, at the same time, notice the inventive aspects of… difficult plantocratic histories, traces, and memories' (McKittrick 2016: 91). The trail ride thus places Black audibility and Black mobility in spaces with complex and oppressive histories.

With over 130 former plantations across the state, Louisiana's plantocratic histories brush regularly against trail ride landscapes. The annual 'Live @5 Ryders' trail ride, for example, takes place in the rolling prairies of Lecompte, Rapides Parish. North of the swamps of Acadiana, it is a serene landscape of undulating hills and feathery longleaf pine trees. The plantation system flourished in the rich lowlands of Rapides Parish which, according to an 1860 census, possessed the highest enslaved population in Louisiana. At that time, almost all sugar grown in the US came from Louisiana

plantations, a significant proportion of them being in Rapides Parish. Whilst the resonances and echoes of this pervasive legacy still run deep in a myriad of ways, the only discernible visual relic in the immediate area is a heritage sign for the house site of Edwin Epps where Solomon Northup spent ten years enslaved from 1843 (Marsden 2002).

Live @5 Ryders hold their first ever trail ride three miles from this site in October 2019 and it is a popular affair. In addition to horses, trucks and ATVs, some folk have pulled up in 'SLABs' – modified historic American cars boasting glossy paint jobs and elbow wheels, now synonymous with the rise of Houston's hip hop scene – to join the procession. The turn-out for the day is so big that where the ride starts and where it ends is difficult to discern. The halfway point is planned in the grounds of some agricultural barns just off the main ride. People mingle, the horses rest and Jarvis, the ride's president, is doing his best to keep some of the younger attendees from using the break as an opportunity for impromptu four-wheeler races on the public road. I get talking to Chris and his wife Midge and end up hitching a ride back with them on a flatbed trailer. As older trail riders, they certainly know how to do it in comfort and style, sitting in fold out chairs with a cooler full of refreshments. By the time we get back to the main site the sun has already set and the transition to the Saturday night party is getting underway. They invite me over to their camp for a bowl of Midge's crab and okra gumbo (they'd caught the crabs in the Gulf just the day before). There is a cold chill in the air and the steaming gumbo warms me from the inside out. We stand around a small fire that has been lit in an old barrel grill and Chris talks to me about his love of zydeco and his trail ride heritage:

> My daddy and granddaddy did this every weekend after a long week's work. It's not a culture, it's a heritage. It's a lifestyle. Zydeco was a way of relieving stress when you were hurt and crying. Zydeco was like praying. A lot of kids these days, they don't know what it is to hurt.[55]

His evocative description captures the depth and meaning zydeco holds for him. It is heritage, it is balm, it is a sanctuary. Chris recognizes the hardship and poverty the music has grown out of and

[55] Chris, discussion with author, Woodworth LA, October 2019

doubts whether the younger generation can connect to it in the same way that he and his ancestors have (this intergenerational tension will be explored further in Chapter 3). 'Scan this scene' he says to me a little emotionally. We look out at the camper vans, the tethered horses, kids are playing, groups are gathered around fires across the site sipping beer. Some teenage girls are already dancing to the DJ as they wait for Lil Nate and the Zydeco Big Timers to arrive and play. 'Scan this scene. Not an ounce of hostility. I'm gonna die doing this. I love it'.

Georgina Born, in her introduction to *Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience* has the conviction that 'perhaps the most important distinguishing feature of auditory experience…(is) its capacity to…reconfigure space' (Conner as cited in Born 2013: 3). The power of sound to create particular 'spaces' is not a new idea to the study of ethnomusicology, especially in the context of African American music 'where everything from field hollers to the beats and breaks of hip hop has historically functioned as a tool of survival and sustenance' (Kun 2011: 23-24). Despite its complicated and racialized history, I am wary of framing zydeco purely within a narrative of *overcoming*. Cheng importantly notes that writers 'tend to chronical black musicianship through themes of empowerment, resistance, and creative impulses borne of adversity' (2018: 130). He emphasises that 'black music is seemingly never allowed just to be, but must always formidably, laboriously be *against'* (*ibid*: 130). Boyo captures this sentiment as he talks of the relaxation and rejuvenation he gets from the zydeco music at a trail ride, even without his horse Cayenne:

> A trail ride is like my peace of mind. If I had a bad week I can go to a trail ride and be like 'God! Relaxation!'. I don't even need to ride a horse. I can go and sit by a truck and listen to the music and just relax. It's so soothing knowing that I can go to a trail ride and rejuvenate, you can rejuvenate.[56]

Whilst Black sonic practises shouldn't bear the burden of always being *against*, we must not forget their vital role in performing the political either. Josh Kun maintains that music is experienced 'not only as sound that goes into our ears and vibrates through our bones but as a space we can enter into,

[56] Raymond 'Boyo' Silvester, interview by author, Lafayette LA, October 2019

encounter, move around in, inhabit, be safe in' (2005: 2). In the creating of particular spaces that can be inhabited, we can understand how music becomes a means of transport and escape. In his book *Audiotopia* Kun explores how music functions as 'an always available site of psychological reward, nourishment, and survival for populations who have been taught over and over again that their lives do not matter' (*ibid*: 19). To return to the work of Wald and African American sonic practices of resistance, through vibrations both physical and metaphysical, music becomes 'a social practice of utopia: a way to perfect the world through sound, both audible and inaudible' (2011: 692).

We are reminded that 'while the power of transparent space works to hierarchically position individuals, communities, regimes and nations, it is also contestable – the (Black) subject interprets and ruptures the knowability of our surroundings' thus reconfiguring the countryside (McKittrick as cited in Livermon 2020: 79). The trail ride, with its beats, resonances, entrainments and vibrations 'interrupts' the surrounding landscape on its journey, reconfiguring it as a place of pleasure and mobility. Writing on Kwaito music culture in South Africa, Xavier Livermon maintains 'the reframing of space through… the practises of partying speaks to experiences of marginalization but also to the labors of self and community that allow for the appropriation and reappropriation of… spaces' (2020: 79). Zydeco at rides helps to define a particular social space of celebration, sanctuary and joy in spite of Southwest Louisiana's complex racial history. Like Kwaito, trail riding embodies 'paths towards making space… and making nation, a process that is also taking place within various sites in the black Atlantic world' (Stanley Niaah 2006: 212).

THE LAKE CHARLES CHICKEN RUN AND THE COLOUR OF SOUND

As it rumbles down country lanes the trail ride is a powerful visual and audible presence that demands to be seen and heard. From within the trail ride, the chain of different sound systems is heard as an invitation to collective joy but how is the ride met by non-participants? From the outside the aural experience of a passing ride is that of cross-fading from one sound system's radius of immersion into another. I have been on rides where onlookers have waved enthusiastically from their porches and cars travelling on the opposite side of the road honked their horns in support of the critical mass. I

have also experienced rides which have been met much less positively, with residents making it clear they experience the 'noise' and 'loudness' of the passing party as an offensive invasion of their sonic privacy. One rider explained to me that some bystanders go as far to 'antagonise people on the ride to cause problems so they can go and report back to parishes or counties or city officials'. In my previous chapter I discussed how the sight of Black trail riders, along with their relationships with horses has been intensely racialized. In this last section I ask, how have the community's cultural practises with sound in the public sphere also come under racial scrutiny? In what ways can we understand race as an 'audible' issue?

It is the evening of January 4th 2019 and Chris Ardoin is live streaming to his Facebook profile page which has over 21,000 followers. Not only a zydeco musician in high demand across Southwest Louisiana and Eastern Texas, Ardoin is also the organiser of the Lake Charles 'Chicken Run', a Creole Mardi Gras parade taking place in the city of Lake Charles. Within the trail riding community, Mardi Gras marks the start of the annual trail ride season with many groups riding out in Creole parades across Southwest Louisiana. In amongst the accordions and sound equipment of his home studio, Ardoin sips from a bottle of water and shifts in his chair before addressing his fast-growing audience. He has bad news. The 2019 'Chicken Run' will not be going ahead:

> Everybody been asking about the Chicken Run. By now y'all figured, because I'd be posting since August, pumping out 'are ya'll ready?!' So, you figured making this video so late, you figured what's going on, right? Let me start off by saying thank you all. My dad was doing it back in the day, I took it over and it blew up 5 years ago. It was the biggest event in Lake Charles ever… So, every year there was always some issue with the city, they always complaining, trying to get it shut down. They kept raising the cost.

In order for the 2019 event to permitted to take place, Lake Charles City Council informed Ardoin he would need to limit the number of parade floats taking part and cut back the length of his parade (from 8 to 2.5 miles) for reasons involving security, insurance and law enforcement. He would also need to pay the city an additional deposit of $19,500 on top of the circa $70,000 the event already costs. Despite being one of a number of long-established Mardi Gras parades in Lake Charles, there



Figure 2.11 Participants on four-wheelers at the LeBeau Mardi Gras parade, LeBeau LA Source: Photo by author 2019

was another message buried in the City's response to Chris: The Chicken Run was too 'disorderly', too 'loud' and in the words of Ardoin, too 'Black'. In the live-stream, Ardoin produces a letter from the City Council which details the list of complaints lodged against the 2018 event:

> They said people were playing music on the floats. Errrm it's a parade right? People using profanities, people drinking on the float… It's Mardi Gras! Y'all know they let this stuff go down on Mardi Gras on the other side… Instead of confiscating bottles, pulling people out of the parade, they documented it so they could say, 'look it's such a problem'. All the people, 20,000 in Lake Charles for this event, and this is it (he holds up the piece of paper), all the complaints. No shootings, no stabbings, no nothing. Everybody exited the building no problem.

For Ardoin, the Chicken Run parade has a strong community outreach component which would be lost if the parade were cut in length. In previous years his parade route has taken the floats, wagons, horse riders and trucks underneath the I-10 interstate to the north side of the city. North Lake Charles is a predominantly Black neighbourhood with over half its resident's living below the poverty line[57]:

> I've been trying to get back to my community – the north side of Lake Charles – and give that side of town something to look forward to every year… Some people say why don't you just do the dance but the parade feeds into the dance and the parade is what goes through the neighbourhood. Not everyone can afford to go to the dance so it's to ride through that neighbourhood and get them kids. Lot of them kids don't know nothing about Creole culture, let alone see Black people on horses or Black people with nice trucks and ATVS. That's the whole point.

The objective of the parade is to bring Mardi Gras celebrations to residents in the low-income neighbourhood who otherwise would not be able to afford the post-parade concert. Ardoin is keen to dismantle the racialized idea that American equestrianism is an activity for the white and show the kids that not only can you can be Black and ride a horse (and own a nice truck) but that it's also part of their heritage. Discussing the long history of Black cultural subversion in music and performance, Tricia Rose maintains that 'slave dances, blues lyrics, Mardi Gras parades, Jamaican patois… all carry the pleasure and ingenuity of disguised criticism of the powerful' (1994: 99). The parade is an invitation to partake in and embrace the vibrations and mobilities of a shared Creole culture that reshapes restrictive racial stereotypes.

Alluding to the double standards of the City of Lake Charles in reference to the conduct of other, whiter parades – 'y'all know they let this stuff go down on Mardi Gras on the other side' – Ardoin concludes that the curtailing, over-pricing and resulting cancellation of his parade ultimately comes down to one thing: 'At this point, y'all understand the biggest event in Lake Charles cannot be a Black one'. The city lead with complaints about the *heard* aspects of the parade – the music and

[57] http://www.city-data.com/poverty/poverty-Lake-Charles-Louisiana.html

profanities – to bolster an argument to cut the parade's route and size thereby containing Black mobility and reducing the drunk and disorderly Black 'noise'.

Jennifer Stoever, in her book *The Sonic Color Line*, details why and how *listening* became a racialized body discipline. She highlights the ongoing struggle of Black people to 'decolonize their listening practises and exert their freedom to sound in safety, diversity, and solidarity, and shift how they are heard in everyday life and in spaces allegedly public' (2016: 2). Her concept of the *sonic color line* codifies sounds linked to racialized bodies – such as music or everyday life – as 'noise', 'sound's loud and unruly "Other"' (*ibid*: 12). Whilst uses of the word 'noise' are not exclusive to race, Stoever refers to how 'the sonic color line invokes noise in direct connection to…blackness' (*ibid*: 13). In recent years America has watched countless Black people silenced, arrested and even killed for the 'noise' they make. Stoever argues that white Americans feel entitled to their 'implicit, sometimes violent, control over the soundscape of an ostensibly "free", "open" and, "public" space' (*ibid*: 2). Through selective case studies her book amplifies 'an ongoing historical conversation between black writers and musical performers about listening's role in black selfhood, agency, citizenship, and racial discrimination' (2016: 6). She contextualises events such as the death of Jordan Davis[58] to detail the historical entanglement between white supremacy and listening in the US. Whilst the concept of race in America has primarily been a visual issue, a matter of looking, as Blake argues, the 'assertion and promotion of audible racial difference offers a counterargument to established notions of the construction of racial difference that rely on visuality' (2011: 546). 'Sometimes tolerated, but more often fetishized as exotic or demonized as unassimilable, noise and loudness frequently function as aural substitutes for the markers of race' (Stoever 2016: 13). The killings of the likes of Jordan Davis, Sandra Bland and more recently Aidan Ellison to name but a few, show how Black 'noise' has been experienced as 'troublesome' and 'disruptive'.

Back in Beaumont with the Texas Regulators our conversation turns to the Lake Charles Chicken Run. Queliquia, who is roughly six months pregnant with her first child, shares her concerns and

[58] Davis was shot and killed by Michael Dunn at a gas station in Jacksonville, FL. Davis had been listening to music in his car when the older white man confronted him about the volume.

connects the Chicken Run's cancellation to the dying out of trail rides in Southwest Louisiana:

> The Chicken Run in Lake Charles was one of the main things in the Black community that they had that kinda killed trail ride alive. They put such a stigma on it and made it seem like this part of Lake Charles culture is so troublesome to where now there is no Chicken Run. Chris was one of the very few people who stuck his neck out and tried to fight the forces within because it kinda stems back to old politics… They've locked certain politicians in and you kinda feel blackballed, you feel more defeated before you even begin. So, a lot of people are kinda giving up. I know they are gonna put this stigma, this road block in front of me and then where does that leave our culture? You're killing us. You're making us die off slowly… When you have officials who know the history, who know this is not something that's new, it didn't start yesterday or two years before… there's been longevity in it and now you feel like you've gotten to a point because you've got a younger generation coming in, you gotta stop it. That's why a lot of trail rides are dying off. Two years ago, we were in Louisiana almost every weekend. We're now in Texas more than Louisiana supporting because they don't want to continue to… It's a strain, and when you have strain it takes the peace and joy out of it… I think race plays a big part of it and it's a taboo subject that people don't wanna touch. A lot of people who give trail rides are people of colour, they are minorities from a lot of poverty stricken neighbourhoods. Opelousas is not known for revenue but you got your ghetto people down there, your food stamp receivers. They place a stigma on them and say 'we don't wanna deal with those people'. That's what they label us as, 'those people'. 'We don't want them in our community, we don't wanna bring them into our community'.[59]

Queliquia regards the cancellation of the Chicken Run parade, like the diminishing trail rides, as an example of the ongoing criminalizing and silencing of Black cultural practices in Southwest Louisiana. Despite local politicians knowing the heritage of Black Creole practises, she suggests they feel threatened by the 'troublesome' younger generation. The 'sound' of contemporary zydeco, with

[59] Queliquia Darden, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.

its heavy bass lines and inflections of rap, has in some part been held responsible for the surge in attendance of youth at trail rides and related zydeco events. It's increasingly 'urban' aesthetic has been rendered as a loss of 'respectability' (see Le Menestrel 2007), a 'fad' that the genre needs to 'survive' (see Ancelet 1988) and blamed for incidents of violence at trail rides (see Giancarlo 2016). Rose, discussing the politics of Black cultural expression, puts forwards that 'large groups of African Americans, especially teenagers, represent a threat to the social order of oppression. Albeit more sophisticated and more difficult to trace, contemporary policing of African Americans resonates with the legacy of slavery' (1994: 145). Sean Ardoin, brother to Chris Ardoin, also picks up on the resonance of this legacy as we discuss the decline of trail rides in certain Southwest Louisiana parishes:

> It's a systemic thing. There was a law on the books stopping more than four Black people getting together. Even if that's not a law anymore, it's still in the consciousness, it's still a vibe. What I've found is, American white people who are the majority, any time they are not in the majority they don't know how to deal. They don't know how to act. If you've never been in the minority you never have to think about how you act if you were in the minority.[60]

The assembly laws Sean refers to were the repressive Black Codes, legislature which was passed in the South after the Civil War to curtail the liberties, movement and labour of free people of colour and newly emancipated African Americans. The Black Code of St Landry Parish 1865 forbade public meetings or congregations after sunset. For a congregation to take place between sunrise and sunset, African Americans would need special permission from the captain of patrol and the meeting would need to take place within said captain's patrol area. Other codes ordained that every African American was 'required to be in the regular service of some white person or former owner', forbade them from entering the parish without permission from their employer, owning or renting a house, carrying fire arms or being drunk. In light of such regulations, Rose suggests 'contemporary laws and practises curtailing and constraining black mobility in urban America function much in the same way and for

[60] Sean Ardoin, interview by author, Lake Charles LA, September 2019

similar reasons' (1994: 145).

My discussion with the Texas Regulators turns to the marginalization trail riders have experienced in the public sphere in Louisiana. They talk about the continual red tape, lack of cultural recognition from the state and the stigma that haunts their activities. As a soon to be mother, I ask Queliquia whether she feels hopeful for her unborn son's generation and the future of their cultural heritage:

> One thing about this culture, you can never kill it… You can never kill the spirit of trail riding and zydeco. Because it was built on the backs of being shunned as Negroes, as Creoles, as the dark people over there. It was built on the hardship and heartbreak of being outcasts. Now it's something grand but they took off some of their white sheets and now put on labels of officials. That's all that's changed. As far as the younger generation goes, as long as you raise your children to see, it will never die. It's immortal, it's here forever. Even if you stop all the rides in all the parishes, I guarantee you the name of Buckwheat, the name of Keith Frank, Rosie Ledet, Grand Mary, Bill Pickett, it's still gonna reign because they built the foundation you can't take away from. You can knock something down but you can't ever mess with the ashes or the dirt. It's of the earth. They keep trying and we gonna keep fighting.[61]

Whilst summoning the historical and ongoing systemic racism and persecution the community have faced, Queliquia vows that whatever the adversity, they will continue to fight to uphold their traditions. The names of leading zydeco artists such as Buckwheat Zydeco and beloved trail riding and Black rodeo events are going to reign with an unfathomable resonance. The foundations are 'of the earth' and cannot be messed with. Eternity Martis, maintains Black 'noise' — in music, in protest or in celebration – 'can easily be dismissed as antagonistic, abrasive, and futile, but it is survival. It forces people to acknowledge black experiences and oppression, and it's loud even when no one wants to hear it. But the thing with noise is that even if you try, you can't block it out. Eventually you have to listen' (2016).

[61] Queliquia Darden, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.

CONCLUSION

In light of the itinerant nature of trail rides, this chapter has explored the role of musical sound in constituting these temporary and mobile sites of assemblage. Whether blasting from the Breadtruck or vibrating from a party wagon, amplified sound plays an imperative part in organising the collective body of the trail ride. Beginning with a discussion of the inception of mobile music at trail rides and zydeco's rise of the 'low end', I centralised the importance of bass frequencies that impact flesh and move bodies. Following Henriques notion of 'sonic dominance', I addressed the unifying potentials of musical sound in the trail ride setting, illustrating how trail ride bodies – human and non-human – can be transformed in relation to sound and rhythm. Made up of a chain of different sound systems, dancing bodies and sweaty horses, the trail ride creates a mobile setting for celebration, vibe and belonging. I have shown the ways that Trail Ride Nation is created and sustained through this 'diffusion of vibrations' (Henriques 2008) and discussed how sound, in its capacity as 'transferrable energy' or 'intermaterial vibration' (Eidsheim 2015) provokes a range of corporeal senses beyond the auditory. I also attended to the role of DJs in creating the 'vibe', to demonstrate how musical sound works to build and negotiate senses of belonging and collective solidarity in the trail ride setting. Considering its emergence within the racialized environment of the American South, I then discussed how grooving to music at the trail ride is not just for pleasure but fosters 'beats and grooves and waveforms as productive sites of resistance' (Wynter as cited in Mckittrick 2016: 90). I use Ashley's term 'interrupting the earth' as a means to consider the spatial implications of the trail ride's vibrational assemblage as it allows for increased visibility and a powerful collective presence on the public roads of Southwest Louisiana and Eastern Texas. Sound is a carrier of culture and a carrier of difference. In the words of Blake, 'sound moves, often unbidden, across distances, through walls and windows, across streets and neighbourhoods, and enters the body. We can shut our eyes to unwanted sights but we cannot shut our ears to sounds, or shield our bodies from their vibrations (2019: 8). In the final section, using the case study of the Lake Charles Mardi Gras parade, I addressed how *listening* has become a racialized body discipline. Jennifer Stoever's concept of the *sonic color line* codifies sounds linked to racialized bodies as 'noise' of the 'loud and unruly "Other"' (2016: 12). The

continued violence enacted against African Americans for their sonic practices makes this an ongoing and urgent topic.

Through the concept of vibrations, this chapter positions zydeco trail riding as a Creole form of sonic agency and community building. In the context of Trail Ride Nation, locations change and trail rides are literally always on the move. Trail Ride Nation gives momentum to a community or imaginary nation (Anderson 2006), an alliance of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 2010) built on shared creolized histories and musical vibrations. Whilst the word 'nation' pertains to the idea of a shared land or physical territory, the trail ride invokes a third space through an architecture of sound as it moves through the countryside. Discussing Black Atlantic performance geographies such as the blues, dancehall and kwaito, Sonjah Stanley Niaah suggests they are sites of 'contestation, travel and transcience, transcendence and boundarylessness, pleasure and ritual, innovation, hybridity, and social integration … embodying questions of and paths towards making space, of making a new self and nation (2007: 212). Trail Ride Nation has evolved and maintained itself 'outside of state apparatus' and 'often in tension with it' (Stanley Niaah 2004: 115). This 'betwixt and between place, this liminality', in the words of Stanley Niaah, 'is the source of its power' (*ibid*: 115).

Chapter 3

BLINGED OUT RIDERS: SARTORIAL STYLES AND THE BLACK YEEHAW AGENDA

Say I'm off and I'm throwed coz I'm addicted to zydeco

Say I'm hood and I'm a G how you trail ride gonna keep you country

Chorus from 'I'm Off & I'm Throwed' by Chris Ardoin (2011)[62]



Figure 3.1 The Texas Regulators in their matching group shirts, Abbeville LA. Source: Photo by author 2019

[62] https://open.spotify.com/track/1k9aGB0WJrWnEZET5jctue?si=131c5377884f40be

The Texas Regulator banner is cable-tied tightly to the side of their twenty-foot-long party wagon. The design is a play on the official Texas state emblem, a stylised five-point star set against an outline of the state map in blue. Two loudspeakers ratchet-strapped to the wagon's metal frame are blasting out a single by Big Freedia, the self-styled 'bounce queen of New Orleans'. At the far end of the wagon stands Mallory, blowing a whistle over the thump of the track, her long braids shaking down her back as she throws her arms in the air in time with the lyrics: 'I'm that Queen that'll make you bounce, I'm that Queen that'll make you bounce'.[63] *Gold thread is woven into some of her braids and her t-shirt is an eye-popping red. Her name is printed on the back above the Texas Regulator slogan 'Mount Up or Shut Up!'. The front of the t-shirt carries an intricate design: a steam train is depicted crashing through the corporate limit sign for Cheek, Texas. The colours are a bright splash of reds, whites and blues. In our immediate wake, Queliquia is in the passenger seat of an ATV. She leans out of the open-sided vehicle and chants along, 'I'm that Queen that'll make you bounce'. A young man rides bareback alongside the ATV on a bay Tennessee Walker. Dressed casually in tight jeans and socks paired with Nike sliders, his legs press tightly into the horse's flank as he skilfully keeps balance without a saddle.*

This is the Texas Regulator 2019 trail ride, held annually in Cheek. Much like Southwest Louisiana, Southeast Texas is impressively flat. Cheek's baby-blue water tower interrupts a monotony of cloudy horizon and in the distance, the hazy form of the Good Year chemical plant looms, thick plumes of white smoke billowing out to merge with the overcast sky. We've left from the Leday Arena which is not just popular with trail rides but also serves as a regular venue on the 'Soul Circuit' (as dubbed by local veteran cowboys) – a rodeo circuit featuring primarily African American rodeo cowboys and cowgirls.

My fellow passengers on the party wagon are all members of the Texas Regulators, ranging in age from seven to seventy, each in the same red shirt with their names printed on the back. A large cooler

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[63] https://open.spotify.com/track/6lhJ2gqFhXCSdUbqByfCyd?si=120fd3df43694ca7

full of soft drinks and Bud Light keeps everyone hydrated or gently buzzed according to their preference. Later in the day the infamous 'Regulator Roux', a ruinous concoction of spirits and fruit juices, will be served at the bar back on site, but it is too early for that now. Ashley is towing the wagon in a large white Dodge pickup truck and in front of her, a police escort leads the ride at a slow pace, lights flashing silently. Behind us come horses, a cluster of ATVs and more party wagons each with their own banners, sound systems and flavour. The whole procession reaches easily over a kilometre as it pounds along the empty country roads. As a participant, it is impossible to fully appreciate its sheer length until the ride hits a sharp bend, allowing a new angle to take in the whole fanfare.

At the half-way point the full length of the ride, a pulsing mass of people, horses, machines and sound systems, is compressed into a roadside field. Wagons rock with dancing bodies and the air is thick with the smell of barbecued pork and gasoline. It is now late afternoon and heavy storm clouds are slowly moving in, driving up the humidity and intensity of the day. The atmosphere is crackling. I pick my way through the party until I spot some of the riders from the group Semien Stables. Donned in their matching pearl-snap paisley print shirts and standing beside their immaculate palomino Quarter Horses, they are easily spotted at trail rides. They wave me over and we get talking about plans for their forthcoming ride in Lake Charles.

INTRODUCTION

With trail ride group names like Hip Hop Ghetto Riders, Blinged Out Riders and Southern Outlaws splashed in colourful monikers across t-shirts, clothing is a strong visual element of the trail ride communicating group membership and defining social roles. Douglas and Isherwood (1979) propose that dress is used to make sense of the world and the things and people in it, and that it is essentially a communicative phenomenon. Similarly, Paul Gilroy argues that 'master signifiers of black creativity, sound, have been supplanted by eyes and visuality' as ways of seeing and being seen (1995: 29). This chapter examines trail ride sartorial style and the entangled and sometimes racialized biographies of their creolized dress statements. I consider the dynamic and hybrid ways trail riders have assembled

their shirt designs, weaving together the aesthetic, material and ideological threads of their choice. This chapter asks, how are trail riders constituted through group dress and how do matching shirts not only symbolise close-knit familial relationships but also become a public display of a cultivated group ethos and vibe? I also consider how the same sensibilities are incorporated into the paratexts created around events and deployed by groups

A striking visual aspect of trail rides is the sartorial mix of urban and rural sensibilities. Cowboy boots may be paired with baggy jeans and white vests or Stetsons with simple sliders. In the next section I will explore the significance of Western wear, considering how the notion of 'being seen' has become a core frame of reference for younger trail riders. I ask, to what extent does material culture provide a means of making and remaking trail ride identities? Discussed here will also be some of the racialized narratives around the American rural cowboy aesthetic and the ways the trail ride community undermine these associations, as exemplified by Lil Nas X and the Black Yeehaw Agenda.

Finally, continuing the discussion on the politics of adornment, I shall look to contemporary zydeco artists and their relationship with 'urbanwear'. How have these kinds of politics been shaped by America's racial history and what is the significance for wearers of hoods and saggy jeans? How can sartorial choices and musical styles signify the heterogeneity of zydeco and complicate narrow constructions of Blackness? This chapter demonstrates how contemporary zydeco and the practice of trail riding, where some people present themselves as 'country' and some as 'hood', is a rejection of any sort of binary divide between the rural and urban, and instead provides a broad space for the sartorial and musical expression of diverse individual interpretations.

'IT'S MORE THAN PUTTING ON A T-SHIRT': GROUP DRESS & EMBODIED VIBES

It is well after 11pm and I'm driving through Opelousas on route to the Yambilee Building for 'Boots & Jeans', a zydeco dance hosted by trail ride group Exclusive Outlaws. Opelousas comes into its own in the dark of night. The town's dilapidated antebellum houses fade from view to be replaced by the

flashing lights of neon bar signs and drive-through daiquiri joints. The one-way circular road system is dominated by tricked-out pickup trucks and candy-painted SLABs, sharp swangas protruding from their lit-up wheel rims. A mash-up of hip hop and zydeco belts out from their powerful stereo systems. At a red traffic light, I roll down my window to let the thud of the surrounding mobile music eclipse my tinny car radio.

I am joining Ashley and Mallory, from the Texas Regulators, who have driven in from Beaumont, Texas for the night out. There remain strong familial and cultural ties between Creoles of Southwest Louisiana and Eastern Texas. Despite running a Texas-based trail ride club, Ashley and her members make the regular journey across state lines to support trail rides and zydecos in Louisiana, as well as visiting family. We'd convened earlier that evening in Church Point, Louisiana for dinner at Ashley's aunt's house before heading on to join the revelry at Boots & Jeans. Mike Broussard is playing the support slot when I arrive – the chug of his single row accordion booms through the Yam's glass double doors as I go through security into the main space. From there a dizzying array of colours and monikers meets my eyes in the dimly lit arena. Trail riding groups in their matching shirts are out in full force. I scan the hall for familiar shirts and faces and quickly spot Shane and his group Barn Yard Posse with their royal blue shirts and the letters 'BYP' embossed in orange down the sleeves. Jarvis and his Live @5 Ryders are hovering near the loudspeakers sporting white polo-shirts with a sparkly laminated rearing-horse motif on the back.

The Exclusive Outlaws are running the show in their crisp white shirts with bold red embroidered fonts. It is very much a family affair with aunts and uncles on hand running the bar and selling fried chicken and red beans. As per the name of the night, almost everyone is in boots and jeans. A photography booth has been set up near the entrance where Sherlitha Caldwell, an in-demand trail ride photographer, is snapping assembled groups against a studio backdrop. As advertised on the event flyer, there are prizes for the 'best dressed' and 'most group members in shirts'. Rhinestone studded belts and boots glitter against the camera's flash. By Monday the images will be splashed across Facebook and subsequently tagged, shared and commented upon in an excited flurry.

To the outside eye, dress is clearly an important visual marker of insider status at trail ride events. Shirts and t-shirts convey group membership, often with one's name and group position printed on the

back. Whilst the collective matching shirts are a dominating feature of any assembled trail ride group, to their wearers they convey so much more than a moniker. For the likes of the Texas Regulators, there is far more to being part of a group than wearing a t-shirt. Ashley explains:

> To clear the misconception about shirts, we sit back and laugh a lot, because its misunderstood, particularly by outsiders. People from the outside coming in, they think, we all just throw on the same shirts and now we are a group. It's not the case. We are a group in our own way, but we call ourselves a family.[64]

Trail ride groups are a social family, often with real family connections. It is not uncommon to attend a trail ride where family members of all ages are pitching-in to sell tickets at the main gate and help with the bar. Ashley places a strong emphasis on the element of family for the Texas Regulators, with the time they spend together as a group of people extending far beyond the weekly trail rides they attend religiously. Their matching t-shirts not only symbolise their close-knit familial relationships but also are a public reflection of what the group is about, which is why the design really matters to Ashley:

> In regard to shirts, the shirts really tell the story of who you are, or the statement or the message you are trying to send. Shirt designs say who you are and what you stand for loudly, without speaking. For instance, my favourite design of my shirt includes symbolism of everything about the Texas Regulators brand including my club colours and the Cheek, TX sign with the train coming through it. Anyone who knows Texas Regulators, knows we got the Regulator train coming through. It's a statement. You know you have to have something that stands you apart from the rest and it has the train and the train is busting through the Cheek Corporate Limits sign because all our events are in Cheek – Cheek is home for us – and on the front of the train there is a cup of Regulator Roux and it says 'the roux made me do it'. The Regulator Roux just to go on record is the signature drink of ours, it's kinda known, it's trademarked, Gwennie you've had some… The train is the largest piece to our

[64] Ashley Lewis, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019



Figure 3.2 The Texas Regulators in their matching group shirts, Cheek TX. Source: Photo by author 2019

> identity puzzle as it symbolizes the strength, power, muscle, and inability to stop the solidity that we possess together - trains can't stop quickly or swerve so anything in its path is run over… That particular shirt entails a little piece of the cloth that is the quilt that is the Texas Regulators and the events that we give. And when people see it, it's all glistening, it's very eye-catching. I can't tell you how many times people stop me about that shirt, even people who don't trail ride. It catches their attention.[65]

Ashley captures the care and time that is spent designing their group shirts. The shirt from two years back, for example, is both a statement and a biography. It portrays a visual narrative, requiring no verbal explanation. The train bursting through the Cheek road sign symbolises the Texas Regulators coming through, making waves and 'interrupting the earth' as she describes in Chapter 2. The illustrated steam train lurching full throttle as it rumbles through Southeast Texas demands to be seen,

[65] Ashley Lewis, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019

heard and felt. Depicted on the shirt, the aim is to convey the vibe and unstoppable energy of their group along with the events and trail rides they host. Not only does the train represent their collective power, drive and unity, it also becomes a rallying point for the group, as Ashley describes:

> It's also the very thing I use to motivate my own group when things come against us and our mission; making them understand the power of our unity and reminding them that the train has yet to derail.[66]

Their shirt is one strand in an entire network of elements such as artwork, flyers and band choices that makes the group who they are. This also holds true for Shane, president of Barn Yard Posse (BYP). In previous years BYP has thrown some of the biggest trail rides in the Rainbow Association calendar. Shane has recently printed the flyers for BYP's forthcoming ride and the buzz on social media around the event is gathering pace when I catch up with him on his family farm in Opelousas:

> The t-shirts are really important as advertisement for who you are and what you stand for. It's easy for people to know the type of people they dealing with when they see BYP. They'll know good times, good food and great hospitality… We have jackets, we have all kinds of stuff. You name it we pretty much got it… Blue and orange signature covers. Just building a brand with it so if people don't know the name, they definitely see the colours. You represent as much as possible, in such a good way to where you don't have to introduce yourself anymore. It's a lot of positive vibes that come with it.[67]

The shirts are not just a visual marker of group affiliation but also become representative of a group's ethos, highlighting how dress can be 'both an intimate experience of the body and a public presentation of it' (Entwistle 2000: 7). Douglas and Isherwood (1979) propose that dress is used to make sense of the world and the people in it, and that it is essentially a communicative phenomenon. According to them, a culture enables individuals to construct an identity by this means of communication. Moreover, dress is used as a signifying practice, a way of generating meanings, which produce and reproduce a culture and its groups (Barnard 2000). Shane understands group shirts

[66] Ashley Lewis, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019
[67] Shane Boagni, interview by author, Opelousas LA, June 2019

as an advertisement for 'what you stand for'. For Shane, BYP equates to 'a lot of positive vibes'. The material t-shirt conjures and represents intangibles like vibes and good atmosphere. In this instance, we can return to Garcia's notion of 'vibe', discussed in relation to sound in Chapter 2, as 'primarily metaphorical, indicating mood, atmosphere, collective feeling' (Garcia 2020: 27). 'Vibe' becomes a defining characteristic for groups like Texas Regulators and BYP, as communicated and embodied through not only shirts but also flyers and other promotional materials. The Texas Regulator train, as Ashley explains for example, is a theme that runs throughout the materials they produce to promote and represent their club and events (see Figure 3.3):

> Shirts and flyers in my opinion go hand in hand and essentially are both promotional materials of not just your events but your brand more importantly… Every piece of what I just said was in that shirt is replicated in some way on every one of our event flyers. Its captivating and tells a story, the same way our brand name does. This draws the immediate attention and intrigue of those who view the flyers or promo videos in passing… Shirts individualise you as a group and the same thing goes for flyers. And they can tell you how much of a stickler I am about flyers. It has to tell the story of who we are, the dynamic we bring and what to expect from our events. On our last ride we went back and forth till three o'clock in the morning, six different versions of the flyer because if it's not right, I'm not gonna put my name on it. My name means too much. So, that's the story of artwork, shirts, flyers. My name is on it, meaning Texas Regulators; that's our name, that's our brand. Your brand is your business, that's your trademark, that's who you are. It has to be right.[68]

Shirts, flyers and other promotional materials might all be considered *paratexts* in the trail ride context. The term 'paratext' was coined by Gerard Genette (1987) and used to describe all the elements that surround a literary work that might be considered not wholly part of it. Whether physical elements – such as book covers, or conceptual elements – such as ads and promotional materials, Genette's argument was that these paratexts matter, that they 'regularly change, edit, revise,

[68] Ashley Lewis, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.



Figure 3.3 A Texas Regulator flyer, complete with their signature train, advertises their 2021 annual dance. Source: The Texas Regulators

or outright create meaning' (Brookey & Gray 2017: 101). Since then, the term has been applied by scholars to a wide range of media such as music and films. Whilst Genette sees the paratext as always outside of or secondary to the text, Gray understands paratexts as 'intrinsic parts of the text as social and cultural unit' (2017: 102). Visual markers (or branding) are powerful elements in how trail ride groups are sustained and how they present to others. From meticulously designed promotional materials to shirts evoking group biographies, all these paratexts are carefully crafted to create vibe and meaning, and to work in tandem with a group's ethos and the rides that they host. Flyers circulate on social media months ahead of the event, and physical copies are handed out at other trail rides or left under the wipers of parked cars. Ashley fondly recalls the years when badges were also given out and she collected them proudly:

> Back in the day we collected pins that were button-like badges with a metal backing that was

> received before wristbands became the economic way to go. The pins/buttons granted access throughout the duration of events but were worn proudly on the chest like a badge of honour in that era. It was an honour to support the hosts back in that day and to see their success; not necessarily in numbers, but to actually be able to see them organize an event and pull each other together… I used to have so many buttons, it's so crazy, people that I went to school with thought that I was so lame for that. And now to see kids say, 'oh you trail ride?!', it's so cool now. We have that phrase 'we were country before it was cool', literally that. We used to get teased for that[69].

The badges became physical keepsakes from trail rides. They were a way to support the hosting organisations and were later worn at school to signify membership of the community. These early experiences of trail ride materialities and group affiliation have clearly shaped Ashley's approach to her own group's paratexts.

The Texas Regulator's shirts and flyers are dynamic and continually evolving, with a new design for each of their annual trail rides. This is something they all have a say in, making the activity of dressing a creative group practise. Queliquia explains:

> For the shirts, we sit down collectively and we decide because nothing is like one individual picking. For us, we come up with a shirt like it really means something to us. It's almost like an inside-joke but it's like oh yeah, there's something about this. First it was the horse, then we elevated to the star, and then we elevated it to our train and then to our drink so it's like we add on but we only adding on because of what we feel as a family. It's a statement within us. It's really not anything to attract other groups or outsiders. It's about how we feel about ourselves and just making a statement about who we are as a whole…All goes back to that family thing and who you are. You can go put a on shirt all day long but if your shirt means nothing and it has no value behind it then you just have a piece of cloth.[70]

The shirts are designed as a group endeavour, a creative process to which everyone contributes. Since

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[69] Ashley Lewis, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.
[70] Queliquia Darden, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.

the shirts come to symbolise the group, the designs need to hold meaning for them all. Queliquia highlights how the designs have evolved in years gone by with different emblems carrying different significance at certain moments in their group's history. Each design builds on the notion of making a sartorial statement and pushes the concept of their group, intertwining clothing with the imagination. Material culture is a strong contour of the Texas Regulator's identity as a group. The material fabric of their shirts is imbued with immaterial intangibles such as their vibe, their unity and their biography. The shirt has to be the perfect encapsulation of who they are as a group and as a family, thus highlighting the interrelationship between clothing and the embodied self. Clothing 'is not just about fashion and adornment, body shape, disguise and aesthetics, or even functionality, but is an extension of our own corporeality. It becomes us' (Gregson and Crewe as cited in Findlay 2016: 80).

Rosie Findlay is concerned with how one's sense of self, in relation to the world, can be constituted in the encounter between cloth and perception. She asks, 'in what ways do the material and immaterial intertwine and co-create our being in the world in the everyday act of getting dressed'? (2016: 81). She argues our sense of who we are is affected by the selection and wearing of clothes. Her main concern is the manner 'in which clothing suggests and reshapes our embodied self by influencing and reconfiguring our experience of ourselves' (*ibid*: 81). As the Texas Regulators frequently say about group membership, 'it is more than putting on a t-shirt'. Donning group-wear becomes a solidifying action and one of collective empowerment, a regulatory function as per their group name. The materiality of the t-shirts, imbued with meaning and significance, changes the experience of the trail ride. You belong, you are a member, you are family.

There is a growing interest in the subject of dress as autobiography and 'the ways in which bodies are fundamental to life experiences, which in turn reflect everyday life' (Tulloch 2016: 8). Writing specifically on dress and the African diaspora, Carol Tulloch sees 'style' as agency 'in the construction of self through the assemblage of garments, accessories, and beauty regimes that may, or may not, be "in fashion" at the time of use' (2016: 4). For Tulloch, this is part of the process of 'self-telling, that is, to expound an aspect of autobiography of oneself through the clothing choices an individual makes', what she has come to call 'style narratives' (2010: 276). These style narratives are part of the creative process of being human. In his discussion on the meaning of style within

subcultures, Hebdige similarly addresses the idea of dress and style as 'intentional communication'. Subcultural stylistic ensembles stand apart from everyday 'normal' styles. The ensemble is 'a visible construction, a loaded choice. It directs attention to itself; it gives itself to be read' (1981: 101). Trail riders display their own codes through their group t-shirts which have been carefully designed rather than quickly thrown together. The group monikers tell their own story and work in tandem with any illustrations that might be on the shirt. Hebdige maintains 'the communication of a significant difference, then (and the parallel communication of a group identity), is the point behind the style of all spectacular subcultures' (*ibid*: 102).

Aside from the stories they tell and vibes they convey, shirts also perform an important and basic function: people see shirts before they see people. In a crowded dance venue or on a dusty trail ride, shirts stand out loud and clear. Group names emblazoned in strong fonts across bright t-shirts provide a quick way to identify groups and individuals. Wearing your shirt to a trail ride is also a sign of respect as one shirt can represent the entire group. Boyo explains:

> That's a sign of respect when you wear your shirts to trail ride. For the different groups, its letting members know who came to their ride, who didn't come. A lot of people look at shirts, they don't look at faces, they look at the back of shirts. That's how you know who has been to your ride, who ain't been to your ride. A lot of people don't know faces but they know shirts. That's how you recognise people – from shirts. If you recognise someone's shirt then you recognise who they is. Shirts let you know how many members came because some people just count shirts or they'll take a picture of a back of a shirt. They came to my ride… You wanna have a fly shirt because that's all that counts.[71]

Boyo summons the moral code of 'if I come to your ride, you come to mine'. If you have a popular and successful ride, it is because you've put in the time to support other trail rides and are being supported in turn. Counting shirts also implicates the finances that are involved. Whilst group shirts imply unity and exemplify fellowship, as Ashley outlines, economics are playing an increasing part in

[71] Raymond 'Boyo' Silvester, interview by author, Lafayette LA, October 2019

the evolving culture:

> I guess the very substance of trail riding is based on the idea of unity but it is competitive – who can have the best event, who can have the most artists. I'm not saying that's how it is across the board but there are some people who are in it for the wrong reasons…Talking about competitiveness, we have outsiders who see a competitive nature within it and think, hmmm there's a lot of people here and they've all paid $20 to get in here, there's 1000 people here so that's gotta be about $20,000. Outside looking in, I'm looking at the dollar signs, I'm not looking at the tradition, I'm not looking at the miles it took for that club to go out and support other organisations or the money that it took for them to shell out and go and support and network and be fellow trail riders in the capacity it really contains. All I'm seeing is the dollar signs and that's where it gets misconstrued on what this is. And that's why I shun on the whole competitive thing, it's not what it's about. It brings on that kind of behaviour that brings on the WIITFMs or 'what's in it for me'.[72]

As Ashley outlines, whilst solidarity is at the core of trail riding, finances are beginning to overshadow fellowship. On outsiders looking in, she feels that they do not see the tradition but instead the potential money that can be made from hosting these events. Queliquia picks up where Ashley leaves off and elaborates:

> It's kind of like a slap in the face, because you are taking what our families instilled in us with trail riding, and you saying to me that it's null and void and it doesn't matter anymore. It means something more to us than putting on a shirt or pulling out a horse or pulling out a wagon. It's what we were raised on, it's our foundation. When you have outsiders that come in and try and shake your foundation, you know, you try and order your stops. You wanna show them the right way without shunning them too bad, because that's what trail ride is about. You don't have to have family ties to be brought into it but at the same time respect those that have family routes and are deep into our trail riding on a traditional level.[73]

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[72] Ashley Lewis, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.
[73] Queliquia Darden, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.

Conversations with older members of the community show growing tensions about respect and tradition as a new generation gets involved. The Texas Regulator group motto about trail riding – 'it's more than putting on a shirt' – captures history, longevity and a foundation. For them, trail riding is ultimately about unity - unity with your group, unity with the other riders, unity with your animals and unity with the music. Putting on your group shirt is dressing up and dressing into this legacy but in what other ways can dress symbolise tradition and legacy? With many trail riders coming from families with agricultural roots, Western wear remains a prevalent sartorial element at trail ride events. In the next section, I'll be exploring the significance of cowboy hats, boots and rhinestones, asking how does dress – specifically 'Western wear' – become a marker of 'authenticity'? And in what ways have cowgirl and cowboy fashions evolved as a means of seeing and being seen?

KEEPING IT COUNTRY: RHINESTONES, BOOTS & BLING

I am back in Parks to see Alton 'Billy' Francis and return some old trail ride pamphlets that he'd lent me on my last visit. After living in Southwest Louisiana almost a year by this stage, I know the journey well. I take the Breaux Bridge route from Lafayette and within a few short miles the residential streets have slipped behind me and I'm driving along muddy bayous and past horses in green fields. Pink spoonbills fly high overhead, on their way to roost at Lake Martin, a local swampland nature reserve teaming with wildlife. When I get to Parks, I find Alton waiting for me on his porch. He quickly ushers me in to sit down. His countless pairs of cowboy boots neatly line the walls of the sitting room. All in mint condition, they present a dazzling array of exotic leathers and intricate stitching. Alton is feeling nostalgic today. As Fats Domino plays from a small radio on his kitchen counter, he talks with an air of urgency comparing his former trail riding years to his perception of the current scene:

> My favourite musician was the late Buckwheat. 'I'm on the wonder' - we'd play that song and Superman was our DJ.[74] That was our leaving song and also the song when we came

[74] https://open.spotify.com/track/63jyTXP7ZpBlV1kXFoYvJn?si=b021a845f8654674



Figure 3.4 Traditional straw cowboy hats worn by riders in Ville Platt LA. Source: Photo by author 2019

> back. It was a lot of good times. Listen, every Sunday the horses were groomed, the saddles were cleaned, we wore chaps, spurs, cowboy boots and hats. We never dressed like the hip hop cowboys. The hip hop cowboys are like a put-together. They don't show any interest in the old ways or the Western life of a Black Creole cowboy. That's why we call them the hip hop cowboys. We were the real old-school Creole cowboys. We didn't mind buying things that represented our Western life… A lot of the kids own the horses but they show no responsibility. Right now, if you go to the trail rides the horses are not brushed, the saddles are not cleaned, the horses have no plates on the hooves, they don't spend money to shoe the horse. They lost care for the horses and for themselves. Look how they dress. They won't spend money buying a cowboy hat, they just throw on a baseball cap. How you gonna put spurs on a pair of tennis shoes?! That's why we call them 'hip hop cowboys'.[75]

Alton places huge importance on the idea of presentation and the material culture of trail riding. Not only did the trail riders of his day look their best but so did their horses. Their dress choices display a

[75] Alton 'Billy' Francis, interview by author, Parks LA, November 2019.

high level of self-awareness, illustrating Goffman's notion that we present ourselves as we hope to be perceived by others (1956). Alton labels the current generation of trail riders as 'hip hop cowboys', taking particular umbrage at their impractical sartorial preferences of caps and sneakers. Their clothing illustrates to him that they do not want to spend money on their presentation and do not know how to care for their horses. He clearly disapproves of the fading out of Western-wear and the seeming loss of trail riding's rural roots. Dress becomes a matter of morality and clothing is construed as an extension of character. Findlay puts forward 'understanding clothing as inextricable from embodied experience in the world demonstrates how it can be that clothes can reorder who we feel we are in their wearing' (2016: 86). By extension, it also demonstrates how clothes can reorder who we feel others are by what they wear. The visual cues of practical apparel such as hats, boots and spurs represent what Alton refers to as their 'Western life' and evokes a frontier rurality along with associations of authenticity and respectability.

The roots of Western-wear and the cowboy 'look' can be traced back to the colonial expansion of North America. Cowboys emerged in the American south and west as a type of rural frontier worker who rode horses and corralled cattle. Clothing would have been utilitarian and a hybrid assembly of what was available and affordable at the time, drawing on 'diverse Native American, English, French, and Spanish-Mexican antecedents' (Gibson 2015: 737). Tasselled leather jackets for example were obtained through trade with French fur trappers and Native Americans. The chaps or *chaparreras* which were worn to protect a rider's legs, were originally Mexican, along with wide-brimmed cowboy hats such as Stetsons which evolved from the Spanish *sombrero* (Nottage 2006: 31). In line with Alton's view, Nottage notes 'the tools of the trade – hats, boots, spurs, scarves, gun belts, and chaps – were what really identified a man as a cowboy' (*ibid*: 32). Whilst Western wear for women sprang about later, thanks to the fashion industry's ability to appropriate and reconstruct, the cowboy became a hyper-masculinized American archetype with supposedly 'authentic' origins in rural frontier work. The cowboy was a sartorial template for masculinity that rested 'utterly on the visual cues of apparel and footwear for its meaning' (Gibson 2015: 734).

Alton's son Shavar arrives to pick up some horse feed tubs and stays to chat. He's recently back from Canada where he's bought a paint horse. He nods in agreement with his father's words about

cowboy apparel. Alton's phone rings and he goes outside to take the call whilst I continue to talk to Shavar. We talk about horses and he tells me how certain breeds have become associated with certain aesthetics:

> I'm a Quarter Horse man but now a lot of people like Tennessee Walkers. Tennessee Walkers tend to be more of a parade horse versus a cowboy horse where you can just get on and ride for miles and pull a cow or pull a truck. A Quarter Horse is like a diesel truck. Tennessee Walker is something fancy like a Mercedes, not that strong and tough.[76]

Shavar distinguishes Tennessee Walkers as 'parade horses', suggesting they are impractical for any cowboy-related activity. He goes on to describe the Tennessee Walker as 'eye-candy' with their flashy proud gait and their swishy tale. They demand to be looked at, making them a good choice of horse for the riders who want to catch eyes. Shavar continues:

> That's why now on the trail ride you see less Quarter Horses. You see, Quarter Horses are the foundation of a cowboy and any cowboy you look at back in the past rode a Quarter Horse. They have regular work and have the endurance to do anything in the rodeo field. They trying to take 'Western' and update it, that's why you see less Quarter Horses. They trying to update it but in the wrong way… I can't knock the younger generation that turn a certain way or have a love for the Tennessee Walkers, but what keep me on the Quarter Horse was my daddy being behind me and being supportive of the culture… If you gonna be a cowboy, then a Quarter Horse is the look, that's the foundation. [77]

In Shavar's view, the younger generation are attempting to update the notion of 'Western'. However, he deems the Quarter horse as 'the look' for a proper cowboy. This attitude instates horse breeds as much a part of an aesthetic or visual code as someone's clothing. Alton and his peers, on their reliable Quarter Horses in their cowboy hats and boots, are 'old school' and therefore more respectable and more true to their roots. Their sturdy clothing, with its agricultural signifiers, represents an authentic and rural Creole way of life. The younger generation on the other hand, cruising by on Tennessee

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[76] Shavar Francis, discussion with author, Parks LA, November 2019.
[77] Shavar Francis, discussion with author, Parks LA, November 2019.



Figure 3.5 Wanda and her Quarter Horse in matching colours at the Annual Breast Cancer Ride in Parks. Source: Photo by author 2019.

Walkers in their caps and sneakers, whilst to their peers construed as arbiters of style, are fobbed off as a 'put together' by their elders, or 'weekend cowboys' as Shane describes in Chapter 1, highlighting that 'dress in everyday life cannot be separated from the living, breathing body it adorns' (Entwistle 2000: 9). And by extension, nor can the horses people choose to ride. In Chapter 1, I discussed some of the ways riders and horses become extensions of each other through ideas of rhythm and corporeal mutuality. This extension can also be amplified in a visual sense through a synchronisation of aesthetics. A horse's tack may often match the colours of their rider's clothing. Reins, leg wraps and decorative bandanas will be carefully coordinated to complement the colours of shirts, hats and gloves as shown in Figure 3.5.

Continuing the discussion about Western wear with Ashley, it's clear that she doesn't share

Alton's concerns. She understands the cowboy and cowgirl 'look' as a core frame of reference for some of the younger generation who attend trail rides. Instead of feeling that Western wear is fading out, she views it as evolving in ways to stand out even further. In an email exchange, she elaborates on this:

> Western-style wear as I knew it as a kid hasn't left but more so evolved. Back then it was Rocky Mountain and Wrangler jeans with pearl snap Western-print shirts and roper boots. Today's Western wear is more of the likes of the urban cowboy/cowgirl and a bit more flashy and includes some popular urban brands incorporated as well. Now we see vibrant paisley print shirts, button-down shirts with brand names heavily stitched on them, and American Fighter t-shirts coupled with flashy rhinestone and intricately stitched pockets and seams. The cherry on top is the accessories, which might be a felt hat, exotic boots – that today's cowboy/girl doesn't want to get dirty – and a belt with animal hide as its base, studded with two hundred rhinestones that capture every angle of light in its bling, clasped together with a Western-like conch or buckle.[78]

With words such as 'flashy' and 'vibrant' Ashley captures the striking assemblages of contemporary Western wear on the trail ride circuit. Incorporating brand names for an additional urban flavour, along with vivid prints and dazzling rhinestones, the outfits drip with attitude and style. Whilst music and sound are central to the trail ride experience, Paul Gilroy argues that 'master signifiers of black creativity, sound and hearing have been supplanted by eyes and visuality' (1995: 29). As a site of celebration, fellowship and pleasure, the trail ride is certainly a place to see and be seen and to make sartorial statements. Ashley's description of a rhinestone-clad belt capturing 'every angle of light in its bling' is particularly evocative in the context of 'catching eyes'. The Oxford English Dictionary has defined bling not only as a 'piece of ostentatious jewellery' but also as any '"flashy" accoutrement that "glorifies conspicuous consumption"' (as cited in MacMillan 2016: 68). For MacMillan however, writing on the performativity of Black dandyism, bling is not simply about

[78] Ashley Lewis, in email to author, November 2021



Figure 3.6 'Cowgirl Swag'. A trail rider wears a diamante belt and Daisy Duke shorts to the West Sider's trail ride, Ville Platte. Source: Photo by author 2015

conspicuous consumption; 'it is also about visual effect, the way the light for instance, strikes the diamond/ice in that necklace or ring to reveal its opulence, and through the optics of shine, blinds the viewer with its visibility/invisibility while simultaneously appearing larger than life' (ibid: 68). Returning to the Texas Regulators shirts (which Ashley describes earlier as 'glistening' and 'eye-catching'), they not only confer group vibe and narrative but are also designed for maximum visual impact. Queliquia is quick to add that they want their designs to invite attention, telling me 'we do it to catch eyes because we wanna look good too. Everyone wants to look good when you spend money on a shirt!'[79]

As acutely observed by Ashley, trail ride fashion has moved from the functional to the flashy. Chris Gibson traces a similar trajectory with the history of Western wear, suggesting that cowboy style has gone from an 'eclectic and unselfconscious mix of clothing practises' to a look which has been 'exaggerated to the point of caricature in much popular culture' (2016: 736). Gibson details how

[79] Queliquia Darden, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019

the cowboy stereotype has been subject to embellishment and subversions via popular culture, which in turn 'generated urban demand for apparel with "authentic" rural origins' (*ibid*: 743). Despite 20th century American society becoming increasingly less connected to rural lifeways, cowboy wear was associated with a rugged, frontier lifestyle and a means to evoke and consume the American West. The Western snap-button shirt for example, whilst seen as apparel essential for the cowboy 'look' and a signifier of rural identity, was not worn by frontier era cowboys. Western wear was steadily dramatized throughout the 1960 and 70s via the mainstream fashion industry with the introduction of outlandish embroidery and shoulder yokes to amplify the status and physical form of the cowboy. The embroidery on shirts became increasingly intricate depicting cacti, ropes, bucking horses and other typical Western motifs. Gibson observes it was country singers performing at the likes of rodeos that pushed this further, 'embellishing fringe, yokes, collars and cuffs with rhinestones that caught the reflection of stage lights and projected an aura of stardom' (*ibid*: 746). Thus, the rhinestone cowboy was born, treading a fine line between 'exaggerated masculinity and decorative femininity' (*ibid*: 746) and illustrating the notion that clothing is not just about fulfilling a practical need to cover the body, but is a material form of consumption with symbolic meanings.

Western apparel, or 'cowboy / cowgirl swag', as it has often been referred to in zydeco songs, is a style code that is celebrated and encouraged at zydeco nights and trail rides. At some of the larger trail rides there is often a vendor selling a variety of Western accessories from straw hats to bejewelled buckle belts. The group Exclusive Outlaws, in addition to their annual trail ride, host two dances each year respectively named 'Boots and Jeans' and 'Dukes and Boots', which hint heavily at the night's dress code. Cowboy boot motifs even make regular appearances on trail ride flyer designs. Placed alongside the images of headline zydeco artists, these accessories are elevated to iconic status in the promotion of such events. In their 2019 song 'Snap Back-Cowboy Swag', zydeco artists Keyun and the Zydeco Masters praise 'old school' Western style, urging listeners that they can't trail ride in a snap back (i.e. a baseball-style cap) but need their cowboy hat.[80] Opening the song with a shout out to

[80] https://open.spotify.com/track/0QGf5PGcH54cohOxtNynrM?si=91eb22ed26994e73



Figure 3.7 A member of 'Swagged out Riderz' at the West Side Riders trail ride, Ville Platte LA. Source: Photo by author 2019

'all them trail ride lovers out there', Keyun sings about Levis, Wranglers and cowboy boots as 'the real deal', reinforcing the notion of needing to 'look' a certain way. For all the cowgirls who are 'ready to strut', Keyun extols Miss Me jeans – a brand of jeans known for their statement back-pockets which are heavily ornamented with rhinestones.

Regardless of their symbolic Western cache, donning boots and jeans to a trail ride is still undeniably practical. On horseback, wearing denim stops the saddle pinching the skin on one's legs whilst sturdy leather boots protect feet and ankles from potential injury. Heeled leather soles are also ideal for zydeco dancing, helping trail riders make a seamless transition from the dusty trail to the dancefloor. Ashley describes how her son's attachment to his boots means he'll wear them anywhere:

My son, when he was six or seven, I never forget the gym coach calling me saying 'Hey,

> look, he's tearing up the gym floor, he wants to play basketball in his cowboy boots. It's just not cool you know'. And that's what I say when we go back to being raised, my son was born in this and the tradition continues, it's a legacy… He's gonna wear his boots anywhere and always wants to wear a button-down shirt.[81]

Her son joins her for many trail rides and is clearly influenced by the Western styles he has grown up around. Despite their utilitarian roots cowboy boots, much like shirts, have evolved dramatically over the last century. Today the array of colours, stitching and shape designs are endless, along with a vast array of leather options. Some of these boots are classed as 'exotics' on account of the unusual and unique patterned leather they are made from. Leathers that fall into the exotic category include crocodile, ostrich, snakeskin, pirarucu fish and shark to name but a few.

> Now that he's getting older he has taken favour to the urban look of things like bling belts and just got his first pair of exotics which are pirarucu. One thing he won't let go of is the cowboy hat and now that he's gotten down the science of when to wear palm, straw, and felt hats you can't tell him anything.[82]

Whilst acknowledging their rise in popularity at trail rides and with her own son, Ashley humorously adds that many wearers of exotic boots don't actually want to get them dirty. This attitude is depicted in Chris Ardoin's song 'Watch my Bootz' (2014), in which the zydeco artist tells a prospective dance partner to not step on his new $700 boots: 'Do what you do and watch my bootz / Don't step on my feet because the tan's brand new'.[83] The implication here is that his boots are to be looked at, not necessarily danced with. Artist Leon Chavis similarly tackles boot culture in his song 'You Wouldn't Understand' (2017) which celebrates trail ride lifestyles.[84] In his second verse, he sings: 'Spent three hundred dollars on a pair of boots / Just to walk through mud for the Grey Goose', thus recognising the irony of owning an expensive pair of cowboy boots that are only used to reach the bar and purchase premium vodka.

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[81] Ashley Lewis, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.
[82] Ashley Lewis, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.
[83] https://open.spotify.com/track/7x5vAAXxrOAW38PhjylcB2?si=3b3fa4b5f4d44705
[84] https://open.spotify.com/track/01YOAhg8BGTWV4nQuh3NdM?si=1d3207326a204437

Gibson has observed that these days, the cowboy 'look' is less about claims to frontier origins or 'performing hegemonic masculinity, and more a template wide open to appropriation and subversion by a myriad of sexual and musical subcultures and scenes' (2016: 748). He suggests that stereotypical elements such as hats and boots have eventually become 'tools for predominantly urban consumers to dress up, play, and perform a raft of subject identities' (*ibid*: 748). The 'performativity' of Western wear is often wryly commented on by older trail riders with the saying 'we were country before it was cool' as they observe a younger generation getting involved. Whilst Gibson does an effective job of tracing how gendered subjectivities emerged through the commodification of the 'cowboy look', he leaves out a crucial part of the Western mythos: whiteness. How can racialized subject positions be visually constituted in Western fashion? In the next section I will explore the popularity of Lil Nas X's song 'Old Town Road' amongst trail riders and consider how the Black Yeehaw Agenda disrupts racialized archetypes around the 'American cowboy'.

I GOT THE HORSES IN THE BACK: LIL NAS X & THE BLACK YEEHAW AGENDA

It is a Saturday in late May 2019 and instead of being on a trail ride or dancing to zydeco in a dusty tent, I've stayed in town. The trail ride schedule is quiet this weekend because riders and players alike can be found at Blackham Coliseum, a domed arena with adjacent barns and ample green space, on the edge of downtown Lafayette. An increasingly familiar scene greets me as I pull into the grassy parking area - a sea of pickup trucks, coolers, black pots and the smell of BBQ and gasoline lacing the air. People mill in and out of the arena, dipping in to catch a band and then back out to join the tailgaters. A veritable throng of boots and jeans, sneakers and Stetsons.

The Zydeco Extravaganza or 'Creole Coachella' as it also refers to itself, is a zydeco music festival boasting a whole day of live performances from some of the scene's favourite players. Today's bill includes Chris Ardoin, J Paul Jr, Terence Simien, and Rusty Metoyer to name a few, with 'Zydeco Boss' Keith Frank bringing the event to a close. Keith Frank is a headliner with a history for making big entrances. In previous years, he has arrived by tractor and at one local festival he even

climbed out of a helicopter.

After a full day of performances, including a zydeco dance contest, the time comes for Frank's headline set. As the auditorium lights dim, people flood down from the bleachers and onto the dance floor. Driving up the hype, the compere instructs the audience to part down the middle, creating an almost biblical avenue leading up to the stage. The crowd is hushed and the anticipation in the arena is palpable. What is going to happen? Before the tension can rise any further, the unmistakeable plucked opening bars of Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' (2019) ring out through the arena and a spotlight turns our focus away from the stage and back towards the coliseum's main entrance.[85] Bathed in the intense glow is Keith Frank, astride a large Quarter Horse. Frank, who usually performs in a baseball cap and baggy pants, is sporting a Stetson-style hat and leather boots. His bright green single row accordion is slung casually over his back. With security escorts either side, Frank and his horse are lead through the parted audience and towards the stage. In the background, 'Old Town Road' continues to play, 'I'm gonna take my horse down the old town road'. A tide of smartphone screens, looking like candles in the darkness, sweeps through the audience to capture this moment. As Frank reaches halfway to stage, the beat drops and Lil Nas X raps his opening line, 'I got the horses in the back'. The crowd go wild. Large rally signs printed with 'This is Keith Frank Country' are waved enthusiastically. No one looks disappointed. The next day local paper The Advocate leads with the headline 'I'm Gonna Take My Horse to The ZYDECO EXTRAVAGANZA'.

When Frank made his entrance on horseback that evening, he was tapping into much more than the fact that Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' was fast becoming the nation's summer anthem of 2019. Having sat at the top of the Billboard Hot 100 for four consecutive months, the song clearly had a wide appeal. To any outsider aware of the popularity of 'Old Town Road', Frank's entrance could have been construed as a playful enactment of the cowboy at the heart of the song. I like to think that Frank was also referencing a long-standing dialogue between zydeco music and Black cowgirls and cowboys. Whilst the presence of the horse alone would have been enough to stir the audience of any

[85] https://open.spotify.com/track/0F7FA14euOIX8KcbEturGH?si=8e63ceb95d9b42a5

inner-city music venue, for the spectators at Blackham Coliseum that day, nothing was too out of the ordinary. Frank has been a favourite on the trail ride circuit for well over two decades and many of his audience at the Zydeco Extravaganza will own or have access to horses. Also, when not hosting music festivals or roller derbies, Blackham Coliseum is home to Louisiana's longest running rodeo and therefore no stranger to a rural crowd (human and non-human animals alike). And yet, the significance of 'Old Town Road' being played at the Zydeco Extravaganza would not have been lost on anyone who was present. Whilst the song spread like wildfire across the US and Europe in the months following its release, it resonated with the trail ride community on a number of levels and perhaps most importantly because 'Old Town Road' has its cultural roots in the history of America's Black Cowboys. Leading on from my previous discussion about Western wear, I will now consider the impact of Lil Nas X's Old Town Road on the trail ride circuit and use it as a lens to discuss how 'dress' has become a powerful site of contention and racial meaning.

'Old Town Road' was released independently in early December 2018 by Lil Nas X who at that time was a bedroom artist, sleeping on his sister's floor in Atlanta. It started gaining popularity after humming along as a meme on TikTok. Lil Nas X was savvy enough to tap into the fast growing 'yeehaw' fad (which will be discussed later). Video creators would upload clips in which they drink 'yee yee juice' and appear to be suddenly transformed into cowboys and girls sporting Western wear in time with the drop of the track's beat. These trends move fast, and by the time the song came to my attention it was already at the centre of a controversy about race and country music. It was thrown out the Country Billboards for not being 'sufficiently country', and subsequently remixed with a vocal addition from country singer Billy Ray Cyrus, adding enough of an element of country 'legitimacy' to get it back in (again, something we will come to later).[86]

The remix has been released for barely a few weeks when, as I'm sitting in the back of the Live @ 5 Ryders pickup truck on the Steady Steppin Rider's trail ride, it comes booming from the loudspeaker in the tailgate. The midday sun is beating down on our heads and the air is thick with the

[86] https://open.spotify.com/track/2YpeDb67231RjR0MgVLzsG?si=b59d6830ccf241e7

kicked-up dust of the old gravel. Someone has handed me their miniature poodle to hold whilst they take a spin on the back of a passing four-wheeler. A long procession of riders stretches out ahead of us. As the chorus rings out, everyone within earshot of the speakers immediately perks up and jubilantly start singing along. It is played another three times during the ride, and each replay is received with the same enthusiasm and excitement.

Whilst its popularity around the nation ensures airtime across a broad range of radio stations, attracting a wide demographic, its significance for trail riders is based on more than its place at the top of the Billboards. Not just Lil Nas X's Western aesthetic but the lyrical resonance cannot be escaped. Whilst Lil Nas X raps half comically about a western life, 'I'm gonna take my horse down the old town road // I'm gonna ride til I can't no more', nothing about his fanciful verses seems out of place in the context of the trail ride. I catch up with Jarvis, president of Live @ 5 Ryders, at the post-ride concert. Keith Frank is playing in the Pig Barn and the dance floor is scattered with two-stepping couples and young families. Noting the number of times 'Old Town Road' has been played in the space of that one ride, I ask Jarvis about Lil Nas X's appeal to trail riders as he tucks into some hen stew:

> I think Lil Nas X is popular with us because he's mixing up two genres, two for the price of one. It's catchy and easy to remember, sing it back and forth. You got kids from three to eighty singing this song at the top of their lungs. It's hip hop with that blend of country so you can reach out to everybody instead of just one demographic. In my opinion, it's popular on the trail ride scene because you have a lot of Black country artists but they are primarily country singers, they haven't crossed over like 'Old Town Road', which is like zydeco – the perfect crossover.[87]

Jarvis suggests the song is popular amongst the trail ride community because, like zydeco, it is the right amount of hip hop with a splash of country. Here is a young Black artist they can get behind. Lil Nas X blends a trap beat with a catchy refrain, defying the limits of genre and highlighting the long

[87] Jarvis Bowie, discussion with author, June 2019

dialogue that has existed between rap and country music. Jarvis looks at me and grins. 'Mark my words,' he says with the air of a prophet, 'one of these artists is going to remake 'Old Town Road' into a zydeco song. You gonna hear that thing remade 4 or 5 times.' It strikes me as an extremely reasonable prediction.

The weeks drift by and 'Old Town Road' becomes an anthem on the trail ride circuit. With horse-themed lyrics and sporting a perfect blend of hip hop and country, it would only be a matter of time before it was covered by a zydeco musician. Zydeco has a long history of borrowing from and being influenced by popular music. Artist Leon Chavis tells me, 'zydeco artists register what's hot and how to put that zydeco spin on it'. We are chatting after his performance at the Creole Renaissance Festival and he elaborates further:

> We got a good thing going on out here but we need good people to represent as well and show us to the world. What we doing with zydeco, I feel like it's the new rap. A long time ago people thought rap was going to dive and it's the biggest thing in the world now. How rap came about, they didn't have money to make instruments so they took other music and sampled it, chopped it up, same thing with zydeco. We take all the music that's on the radio and we flip it and make it zydeco. We play it on our accordion and make something new that the world hasn't heard.[88]

Like rap, Leon articulates how zydeco borrows widely and experiments freely. It is therefore entirely fitting that the first zydeco artist I hear covering 'Old Town Road' is Leon himself at a small club called Teddy's Uptown, complete with a chequered dance floor and mirrored walls straight from the 1970s. The club is perched along a sparse stretch of Highway 190 that runs between Opelousas and Eunice, littered with decaying dance halls and stray dogs. Teddy's is the venue for the *Big 8* trail ride unofficial after-party. The place should be packed but a tropical storm the previous night has caused extensive damage at the Yambilee Arena where the trail ride is being hosted. Trees have crashed down onto camper vans and the site has been flooded. Despite the chaos, luckily no one has been

[88] Leon Chavis, interview with author, August 2019

harmed. Whilst the trail ride has been cancelled, the 'All White' after-party in Lawtell still goes ahead, attended by a small handful. Leon is performing a song from his recent album when he suddenly merges into the chorus of 'Old Town Road'. The small dancing crowd cheer loudly and lyrically it sits seamlessly.

Though there may be elements of whimsical comedy in Lil Nas X's lyrics, there is little irony when a musician like Leon Chavis, who regularly plays to trail ride audiences, sings 'Old Town Road'. As trail riding has become a core feature of the zydeco scene, the rise in trail ride themed lyrics has been undeniable, along with frequent references to boots, jeans and cowboy hats. Whilst one research participant suggested that it is 'exclusive lyrics' like the ones that refer to trail ride culture which could stop zydeco artists from ever winning a Grammy, if the Lil Nas X phenomenon has done anything, it has put the Black cowboy firmly back on the map.

'Old Town Road's' popularity is owed in part to that fact it has tapped into a larger movement, the Black Yeehaw Agenda, which presents and celebrates an aestheticized version of the very much overlooked Black cowboy of America. At its core is a rejection of what the cowboy had come to represent in popular culture i.e. 'white, male, cisgender and colonial' (Elan 2020), as epitomised by Lil Nas X's pink cowboy outfit to the 2020 Grammy awards which BuzzFeed supportively described as 'dominatrix cowboy vibes' (2020). 'Old Town Road' has become an anthem of the Black Yeehaw Agenda, proved by the fact Lil Nas X has remixed the song not once but three times to make it the longest running number one in Billboard history, beating the likes of Taylor Swift and Michael Jackson. This has not gone without tension, and Lil Nas X found himself at the heart of a bigger debate about race and 'country' identity, which I will now discuss.

By releasing the song on Country Billboards Lil Nas X stepped into the country music arena, which has long been associated with whiteness. Despite the deep Black roots of country music and cowboys, for decades Nashville has essentially framed and marketed the rural experience as 'white'. As Caramanica points out, 'when an artist like Lil Nas X – who is black, and raps, and is from Atlanta, with no ties to the country music business – lays claim to rural aesthetics, even in a way that's partly tongue in cheek, it causes real disruption' (2019). 'Old Town Road' appeared on the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart in March, before being deemed 'insufficiently country' and

quietly removed from the charts. Lil Nas X was accused of 'culturally appropriating' country music and with it, the long-whitewashed cowboy aesthetic. One website, calling itself 'Saving Country Music', published a blog post titled 'Billboard must remove Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" from Country chart'. The anonymously written piece refers to 'Old Town Road' as 'nothing more than an internet meme'. Taking huge offence at the song's reference to horses and 'wild west signifiers', the blogger declares it is a '1:53 joke' that is 'pushing actual songs, country or otherwise, down the charts' (2019).

In response to the line in the song '*Cowboy hat from Gucci, Wrangler on my booty*', there were calls on social media to boycott Wrangler, which has long been the jeans brand of choice for cowboys and rodeo riders. People took to Twitter to burn their Wrangler jeans in protest of the brand's involvement. This violent reaction evokes a long and persistent history of the racialization of Black dress practices, demonstrating how clothes have become 'a site for contestation and racial meaning' (Leonard 2020: 138). The Wrangler episode calls to attention zoot suits for example and the persecution of their African American, Mexican American, and Filipino American wearers in the 1940s. Zoot suits were 'sharp' outfits, consisting of high-waisted, wide-legged trousers and long jackets with large shoulder pads and wide lapels. The style was closely associated with jazz musicians and jitterbug dancers and was embraced by working class urban youths in the 1940s. While its wearers saw it as a mark of style, sharpness, and a sense of pride in outsiderness, zoot suits were construed as a sign of criminality and gang activity by officials across the US. They were outlawed by Los Angeles city council in 1942 for ostensibly being a waste of cloth during a time of wartime rationing. In the summer of 1943 white servicemen took to the streets of LA to assault 'unpatriotic' zoot suit-wearing African Americans, Mexican Americans and Filipino Americans, beating them and stripping them of their countercultural clothing. Notably, white wearers of the suits were left untouched. These targeted attacks came to be known as the 'zoot suit riots' and subsequent violence followed in cities across North America. Douglas Henry Daniels regards the term 'zoot suit riot' as a euphemism for what were actually racially motivated beatings, asserting that 'the riot was not so much about zoot as it was a pogrom against dark-skinned people' (2002: 102). Henry Daniels understands the 'riots' as characteristic of 'American society's refusal to grapple with complex social

issues and to attack symbols instead', thus dress itself became the issue (*ibid:* 101).

The clearly racist backlash against Lil Nas X's country western attire and music caused a furore and fans rallied in his support. Bruce, a Lafayette-based hip hop producer who was raised listening to zydeco, tells me:

> 'Old Town Road' starts getting hot and people are starting to gravitate towards it and he started climbing the charts on the country music scene and they started denying his impact on the country music scene. What happened with the racial issues, the Black culture gravitates towards it because we feel like we are being left out, our voices are being silenced. This guy is making a momentum shift in the country music scene and they are denying it solely on his blackness. It made a gravitational pull for the Black folks to speak up for him and it created this snowball effect and really popularised him, perhaps more than he would have been otherwise.[89]

Country singer Billy Ray Cyrus stepped in to do the remix, added the 'legitimacy' to help the song land on Billboard's Country Airplay chart. In light of Cyrus getting on board to 'legitimise' Old Town Road as a country song, Hughes points out that the fact that Lil Nas X 'has had to force his way in is a real commentary on country music's long-term racial politics, which has always had a very uneasy relationship with blackness' (2019).

Lil Nas X evokes all the spatial qualities of an everlasting American frontier in 'Old Town Road'. He conjures an endless road and the image of a lone cowboy disappearing into the sunset, an image that has long been sold as 'white'. Nittle maintains, the 'narrow framing of the African American identity as urban and the erasure of black people from the American mythos lie at the core of these controversies. By rejecting the notion that country-and-western culture is wholly white, black people aren't just pushing for historical accuracy but demanding – as Baldwin did decades ago – to be acknowledged as authentically American' (Nittle 2019). Lil Nas X dressed as a cowboy is deemed a 'joke' and he is denied access to the American dream, despite African Americans being profoundly

[89] Bruce, discussion with author, June 2019

involved in the cattle industry, rodeo and 'the West'. As Pearson highlights 'American history has frequently misrepresented, marginalized, or omitted their contributions' (Pearson 2004: 190). One example of this omission is Bill Pickett, an African American cowboy from Taylor, Texas who invented the popular rodeo event of steer-wrestling or 'bulldogging'. Until Pickett found fame for his trademark bull wrestling technique, he had to dress as a Mexican toreador to compete because rodeos did not accept Black contestants.

As I'll discuss in more detail in the next section, clothes have become imbued with racial meaning. David J. Leonard maintains the 'politics of adornment' have been shaped by America's racial history. 'It is not just the clothing but the body wearing the clothes, a racial body imbued with meaning and signification in the dominant white imagination' (2020: 139). It is this dominant white imagination that baulks at 'rapper' Lil Nas X in Wranglers or as I'll explore next, is up in arms when 'folk musician' Chris Ardoin turns up to play a zydeco gig in New Orleans dressed in saggy jeans and a cap.

ZYDECO S(W)AG & THE POLITICS OF ADORNMENT

Whilst Western wear is a celebrated and prevalent style amongst contemporary trail riders, one of the most striking visual aspects about their dress is the sheer mix of urban and rural sensibilities. Cowboy boots may be casually paired with saggy jeans and white vests; horses may be ridden bareback in socks and sliders; pearl snap shirts role up to reveal intricate sleeve tattoos; rhinestone-studded belts add sparkle to daisy duke shorts. This developing and hybrid aesthetic is perhaps also exemplified by the evolving names for trail ride groups which over the last 40 years have gone from themes around civil rights, such as Lawtell's 'Freedom Riders', to names blending Western iconography with hip hop lingo such as 'Blinged Out Riders', 'Rude Boy Ghetto Riderz' and 'Swagged Out Riderz'. I will now consider hip hop's concomitant styles such as hoods and baggy jeans which have as much of a place at trail rides as cowboy hats and boots (see Figure 3.8). This final section will explore how such aesthetics are both embraced and problematized in contemporary zydeco, and the ways in which



Figure 3.8 A mix of urban styles worn at Lil Nate's Mardi Gras Parade, Opelousas LA. Source: Photo by author 2019

sartorial choices complicate narrow constructions of Blackness. As explored earlier in the chapter, the diversity of clothing has at times been met with some disapproval from elders in the community who've labelled the new generation as 'hip hop cowboys', drawing links between changing dress aesthetic and what they see as a diminishing of standards, indicated by dwindling respect for the tradition and increasing occurrences of violence. Despite his very clear love of trail riding, Boyo has an acute sense of the changes he's witnessed since being a child. He relates some of this to me as we catch up one week after the horse auction at Dominique's Livestock Market in Opelousas:

> When I started going on trail rides, I really loved it – the atmosphere, you can run bare foot, everyone got along, had no fights. Everything was family orientated. Now it's messed up because we got too many people who wanna be gangsters… The atmosphere started changing when we got all these gangster trail riders. All the youngsters started buying horses, going there with their big jacked-up trucks, tearing up other people's property, the little girls started

> dressing inappropriate… Trail ride is not about being in a gang, trail ride is about spending time with your family… There's not a lot of trail ride groups that are out there that are all about being community.[90]

Boyo uses the term 'gangster' to describe the change in attitude and 'inappropriate' dress of the younger generation. He feels things are far less community and family orientated than they were when he was a child. Also, a recent drive to run trail rides for profit is having a negative impact on the vibe of the events (as echoed by Ashley and Queliquia earlier in the chapter). Alton and Boyo's thoughts illustrate a sustained perceived connection between hip hop and gang culture, highlighting a long trend towards essentializing hip hop and its associated aesthetic as 'urban', along with all the negative connotations that brings with it.

Alton's term 'hip-hop cowboys' is both a nod to the younger generation's changing dress style and to the evolving sound and visual presentation of zydeco. When he's finished with his phone call, he joins Shavar and I to pick up where he left off:

> Zydeco music has changed a whole lot from the late Clifton Chenier, Buckwheat, Rockin Dopsie… Right now, zydeco is a mixture of rap and it's not pure as the old school zydeco… The old school cowboys and cowgirls, we don't care to go no more because the music doesn't give us no interest. The interest it brings is for the youngsters because it's got the rap and zydeco together. We didn't care for the rap because we just wanted the plain straight zydeco – rhythm and blues. The people playing zydeco today are not going to interest my generation to go. Right now, there are not many musicians singing in Creole… The musicians today are using a lot of the raps to bring the younger generation to be interested in their music. But by bringing the rap in, they're losing the culture. The way they are doing it with the rap, they are driving it away… the minute they start using zydeco with the rap, it's like a violent instigator and they start fighting, they start shooting. That rap and zydeco mixed together is the instigator of the fighting and drama. That's why I don't go to trail rides. The last old school

[90] Raymond 'Boyo' Silvester, discussion with author, Opelousas LA, November 2019

> trail ride I did was in 1997. And then we all got off the trail ride schedule. Too much violence.[91]

As a regular attendee of a monthly luncheon held in Parks for Creole speakers, language remains a vital aspect of the culture for Alton and many other Creole elders. The fading out of Creole lyrics and the presence of rap in contemporary zydeco has therefore been equated to dramatic cultural erosion. This is made clear by his thought that contemporary zydeco is not as 'pure' as the 'old school' music. He holds the incorporation of 'thug' genres like rap and hip hop has been morally damaging and has been responsible for occurrences of violence and shootings at trail rides in recent years. From an intergenerational standpoint, changing dress aesthetic and conduct has also been heavily associated with the evolving music. One trail ride organiser explained to me she did not like it when artists started playing their 'hip hop style' songs at her ride in case it riles up the crowd and 'the hoods', as she referred to some of the younger attendees, start fighting. These styles could be understood as 'status-seeking fashion statements' and the trail ride as a place to be seen and show off these styles. Baxter and Marina writing on urban youth of New Orleans view hip hop styles like sagging pants and hoods as emblems of youth subculture. They understand the potential for violence as sparked by symbolic communication in a resistant subculture: 'obviously clothes do not pull triggers, but clothes can serve as triggers in an alternative status order when subcultural capital is accumulated from posturing that is sometimes backed up with violent action' (2008: 105)

The discourse of decline is expressed not just by the older generation but also cultural critics, who have at times been disparaging about contemporary zydeco's artistic transformations and immense popularity on the trail ride circuit. Sarah Le Menestrel suggests that the notion of respectability underlies this disapproval: 'whether Cajuns or Creoles, its detractors often criticize it for its rap and hip-hop influences. They stress the rural origins of zydeco, despite the fact that the style evolved with urban influences' (2007: 101). Musician Chris Ardoin is acutely aware of this tension from both within and outside the community. Chris is descended from a long line of prominent zydeco artists

[91] Alton 'Billy' Francis, interview by author, Parks LA, November 2019.

and has grown up steeped in the music.[92] After an embarrassing 'Best Of 2019' poll run by local newspaper The Times of Acadiana where only one actual zydeco artist was featured among the nominees for 'Best Zydeco Band' category, Chris takes to Facebook to address his fans in a live video post. He outlines to his viewers why notions of 'purity' or 'rural origins' have never been correct when it comes to zydeco, which has continually evolved with urban influences:

> What people don't understand though when you say 'zydeco aint the same any more' – and I've been around zydeco for a long time – zydeco has always been influenced by whatever music is hot at the time. So y'all wanna talk about 'it ain't nothing but rap or it ain't nothing but this or this', but zydeco ain't the same anymore because you changed… Because if you go back and listen to Clifton Chenier, Clifton Chenier was inspired by blues so all his songs were blues songs that he used to sing in French or some old Ray Charles or Fats Domino that he put a spin to. Same thing with Buckwheat. Buckwheat was inspired by a little more pop music and rock and roll so he spread his a little further out than just blues… I came along, I'm influenced by Jagged Edge, Dru Hill, you know all these R&B singers so that's where my style came from. So, if you not into that, if you ain't into R&B and some of this newer music well then no, you are not going to like the zydeco that we are doing now. Understanding that, you can say 'all they do is hip-hop' but on my albums and on everyone else's albums… even though we got some newer style stuff to appeal to the newer people that are coming into the music because the game has changed, know in the back of your mind that we are still putting that old stuff in there. I don't want y'all to keep saying 'zydeco ain't the same'. Whatever the

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Chris Ardoin comes from a long lineage of Creole zydeco royalty which traces back to the music's founding father Amédé Ardoin (b1898)**.** Chris' dad, accordionist Lawrence 'Black' Ardoin (b1946) was well known for his electrified Creole blues style but was taught to play the older styles of Creole music by his father, Alphonse 'Bois Sec' Ardoin (b1915). Bois-Sec was a Creole accordionist and singer who rose to fame in the 1960s performing with Creole fiddler Canray Fontenot. Their band, the Duralde Ramblers, represented the voice and sound of traditional old French music, *la musique Creole* (Ancelet 1984), standing apart from the newer styles of zydeco played by the likes of Clifton Chenier. Like his father before him, Chris was raised with zydeco's traditional roots but has taken the music in his own direction, demonstrating his passion for smooth R&B by making use of auto-tuned vocals and resigning his accordion to filling between vocal lines. The following playlist demonstrates the changing sound of four generations of Ardoins: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6NlxPnRxz58YHqr1wFefnx?si=2110a6a379384190&pt=9715a97cf0de304c93bca17e4d0ed8d3

popular music is at the time, zydeco is going to sound like at that time.

As Chris illustrates, the shifts and changes in approaches and aesthetics have been primarily generationally driven as young artists incorporate the foundations of zydeco instrumentation and expand what can be done within a zydeco sensibility. Each generation of zydeco musician manages to tap into what is current, demonstrating the genre's creativity and flexibility. The use of reinvention has been a core tenet of zydeco, taking existing songs and other genres, blending them with accordion and a zydeco beat, to forge a new sound. This has extended to the artists' visual aesthetics as well. Fashion, like zydeco, is not a stagnant idea. Both are in constant flux, evolving in ways that keeps them current. Chris describes how, in addition to developing his music, he changed the way he was presenting himself – 'the whole swag' as he calls it, referring to both his style and attitude:

> Listen, I changed the music back in 2006, especially in 2007 when V.I.P came out.[93] I added the keyboards, the synth, the way I was dressing, just the whole swag. I did that for me because of all the music I was into… You are inspired by something and run with it and do it your own way.

Since the release of his album *V.I.P* in 2010, Chris has appeared on album covers in gold chains, sunglasses, baseball caps and in more recent years performs with a bandana around his head. However, contemporary zydeco artists have not only faced criticism for their musical innovations, but their increasingly 'hip hop' aesthetic has also come under scrutiny. Whilst the older generation within the community may lament the watering down of Western dress at trail rides, there has been similar pressure on players to package zydeco to outsider audiences with a certain folksy look. Chris continues to explain in his online video post:

[93] https://open.spotify.com/album/0gPEaKciDlQpDT1G9vhwsw?si=roW_fKJrRfmioXUMNP3oMA

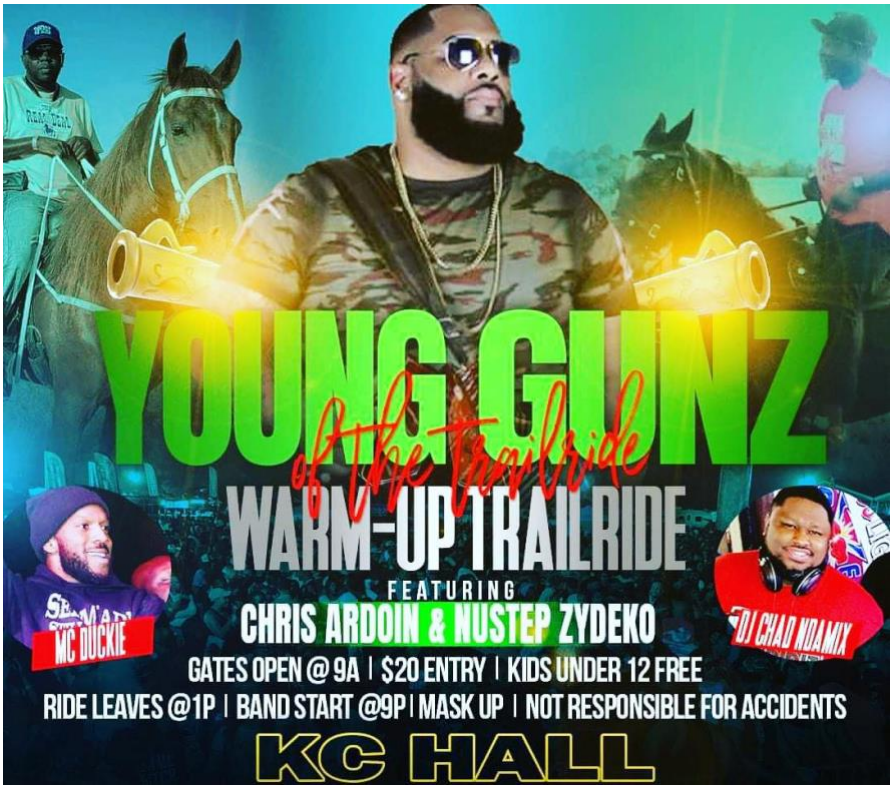


Figure 3.9 Chris Ardoin, sporting gold chains and sunglasses, on the flyer for the Young Gunz annual trail ride. Source: Chris Ardoin Music Facebook

> When we go on the road, them people have the nerve to tell us we ain't playing zydeco. We go as far as New Orleans and they don't know shit about zydeco in NOLA. They know what's on the commercial stuff but that ain't real zydeco. When we leave this area and Houston, people say 'what is that? That's not zydeco'. What do you mean that's not zydeco? We started this shit. Especially for me. My family were the first ones to record the shit so how you gonna tell me what we play? I play NOLA one night at Rock'n'Bowl and haven't been asked back in two years. They not telling me what I am / am not playing. If you don't look like they expect you to look, with the tight jeans and the cowboy hat – we not all country... When we did the movie with Burt Reynolds, we pulled up and they were like 'ummm can you look more "zydeco"?'. I'm like 'but you pulled me from a gig so you know what you are getting'. If we don't look a certain way, like Boozoo [Chavis] from the archives…

Chris expresses his frustration at not only being told that he's not playing authentic zydeco music but also being requested to look 'country' when playing far from the trail rides of Southwest Louisiana



Figure 3.10 The cover of Boozoo Chavis' 1990 album Zydeco Trail Ride, displaying Boozoo's definitive country image that came to shape expectations of what a zydeco performer should look like. Source: © Flat Town Music Co., Ville Platte, LA.

and Eastern Texas. He refers to the late Boozoo Chavis who toured widely, always performing in a cowboy hat and western shirt. As a horse trainer and bush-track owner, Chavis appeared on his album *Zydeco Trail Ride* astride a horse, accordion in hand, epitomizing an expected image that many listeners beyond the Houston to Baton Rouge I-10 corridor associate the genre with (see Figure 3.9). Through his Rock'n'Bowl anecdote, Chris paints a picture of a distilled and commodified country zydeco artist, a package which he and his peers refuse to fit into.

The notion of a commodified African Americanism is depicted in the work of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. In his painting *Zydeco* (1984), he explores the dissemination and commodification of zydeco music. As Rodrigues comments of the work, 'in *Zydeco* the black musician is put on display through the media apparatus as depicted for the consumption of the predominantly white, mainstream

media. Basquiat's musician, though linked to a positive aspect of his cultural past, is still delimited... The black musician's role is only to entertain, to consensually play in to the mainstream's stereotypes of blackness/black culture if he wishes to excel' (2011: 236). Basquiat is concerned with the experience of being Black in America. His work shows us that the price of mainstream media recognition strips the Black artist of any complexity and packages them for consumption by the white masses: 'Whether he is the folksy musician, the edgy painter, the rapper or the actor, the black celebrity figure is always, first, black —he is always, first, associated with "SUGAR CANE," "TOBACCO," manual labor and/or "GANGSTERISM" — he is always a commodity, heir to America's racist, slave-owning past' (*ibid*: 234).

Commodity culture and Black dress practises have been discussed by both David J. Leonard (2020) and Frank Garcia (2018) in relation to the mandatory league-wide dress code issued by the NBA in 2005 to police dress. The dress code represented an effort by the NBA to counteract negative perceptions of NBA players through 'simply restricting, controlling, and regulating the assumed signifiers of blackness', i.e. for them 'to look a little less gangsta' (Leonard 2020: 141). For the NBA and many of its white audience, the hip hop aesthetic of baggy jeans, bling and caps, symbolised 'thuggery' and 'criminality'. Garcia argues the code was 'a racializing tactic that was intended to further demonize and control players and Blackness by rendering hip-hop culture both criminal and unprofessional' (2018: 105). The attire needed to be 'respectable', thus making their 'Blackness' more appealing to a white gaze. The resulting emergence of 'nerd chic' which the players embraced to the extreme, understood through the lens of Black dandyism, is a story of subversion and resistance. Shantrelle P Lewis, curator for exhibit *Dandy Lion: Articulating Black Masculine Identity* describes dandyism as follows: 'A black dandy is a gentleman who intentionally appropriates classical European fashion but with an African diasporan aesthetic and sensibility… By looking sharp, the Black dandy fashions a sense of pride, positivity, and self-worth that can transcend circumstances, as well as societal perceptions' (2017: 9). Furthermore, Lewis understands Black dandyism as 'a sartorial manoeuvre used by Black men to confront criminalising stereotypes, widen conceptions of masculinity, and create a new self-identity for the twenty-first century' (2017: 14).

The anecdote about the NBA dress code shows how Black fashion has, over time, challenged

proscribed racialized notions of self and evokes a long history of African Americans finding agency through clothing. It also speaks to the significance of dress style in the continued racialization of Black bodies. The NBA player's sartorial choices resist limited understandings of Blackness that 'define authentic hip-hop styles and urban masculinities, those very aesthetics and styles used to demonize and pathologize black youth' (Leonard 2020: 135). Much like zoot suits before, dress such as hoods or saggy jeans become a justification for profiling and violence. In 2004 the entire state of Louisiana tried to pass House Bill 1626 that made wearing pants below the waistline or exposing the wearer's skin or underwear illegal. It was rejected by the state's senate but a couple of individual cities, one being Opelousas, zealously jumped on the idea. Opelousas, which prides itself as being 'the birthplace of zydeco', had previously successfully outlawed saggy pants in 1998 along with other Louisiana municipalities including Shreveport, Delcambre, Mansfield, and Alexandria.

For Black men, fashion can be a matter of life and death. When Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman in 2012 he was wearing a hoodie. Garcia notes that 'like sagged paints, hoodies, within the dominant American imagination, signify Blackness and criminality and Zimmerman, like many others, used this fashion signifier not only as evidence of criminality but as authorization to execute violence upon Martin's Black body' (2009: 128). Martin's murder shows how clothing can be a racial signifier 'imbued with the logics of antiblack violence and white supremacy' (Leonard 2020: 144). A recent study from Oregon State University (Gurung et al 2020) analyses clothing and perceptions of African American men. Their study shows that clothing-based racist stereotypes continue to persist against Black men and can lead to negative stereotyping and snap judgements. Lewis notes 'the post slavery Black brute figure has morphed into the Black athlete, the rapper, the juvenile delinquent' (2017: 10).

To return to Chris Ardoin; his arrival to play at the New Orleans Rock'n'Bowl dressed in baggy jeans and a cap makes him less 'appealing' to the predominantly white audience who do not accept this aesthetic as 'authentically' zydeco. As David L. Andrews puts forward, 'many in the white population are gracious enough to accept, even adulate, African Americans, but only if they do not explicitly assert their blackness… African Americans are tolerated, even valued, if they abdicate their race and are seen to successfully assimilate into the practises, value system, and identity, of white

America' (as cited in Garcia *ibid*: 108). Zydeco artists, like Chris, refuse to be commodified, especially by outsiders, both in terms of the music they are playing and the aesthetic with which they present themselves. They subvert expectations of the music's rural history and, in the words of Leonard writing on NBA players, remix aesthetics 'in a way that illustrates their power, subjectivity and agency' (2020: 137).

Despite the concern from older members of the community, these artists have proved to be fiercely protective of their Creole heritage and, stylistically speaking, are able to demonstrate zydeco's unique ability to speak to the mainstream whilst still embracing its rural associations. Chris's 2011 song 'I'm Off & I'm Throwed' lyrically blends hip hop style lyrics with a trail ride backdrop, all underpinned by driving accordion and heavy bass drums.[94] The chorus and first verse run as follows:

I'm off and I'm throwed
Coz I'm addicted to zydeco
said I'm hood and I'm a G
How you trail ride will keep you country

I got my jeans on and they're sagging
And they tucked in my boots girl I'm ready.
Got my bolo and it's tucked behind
My big belt buckle, girl I'm on shine

The term 'keepin it country' is a playful inversion of hip hop's 'keepin it real' which Kopano notes for rappers signifies 'being true to the rich legacy of rap' (2002: 204). Perhaps it is a way for zydeco artists to honour both the legacy from which zydeco has emerged and the trail rides to which it is closely tied. Through his 'sagging' jeans and being 'hood', Ardoin affirms his Blackness. His sagging jeans speak not only to the aesthetic lineage of hip hop but also fly in the face of Louisiana's governmental attempts to control and punish the style. At the same time, Chris is undeniably

[94] https://open.spotify.com/track/1k9aGB0WJrWnEZET5jctue?si=a8495da79e44405f

'country' with his big belt buckle and cowboy boots. Through his lyrics, Chris implies that 'keepin it country' is not just about dressing like a cowboy. You can wear saggy jeans, you can be hood and still be country.

Similarly, accordionist and singer Keith Frank provides an example of a zydeco artist who encourages his listeners to embrace modernity whilst simultaneously celebrating their Creole cultural heritage. Frank was part of the generation at the forefront of the evolving sound of zydeco in the early 1990's, incorporating heavy bass drums and R&B and hip hop influences into his music. Just as Chenier had divided audiences in the 1950s, Frank's new musical style dismayed purists who criticized it for being 'too loud, too urban – in short, that it was not zydeco, that he was casting away his Creole roots' (Demars 2016: 8). However, Frank's younger audiences went wild for it, reflected by his continued sell-out shows and popularity on the trail ride circuit, earning him the title 'The Zydeco Boss' (Tisserand 1998). Demars has called the 'hip hop, reggae and even Latin elements to his music' and the fact that he sings almost exclusively in English 'signs of the non-negligible impact of mainstream American culture among Creole youth' (*ibid*: 8), however she is quick to point out that it does not mean that Frank is denying his Creole heritage or identity. He remains a leading voice in the promotion and protection of Creole culture which he holds dear, reflected not only in his lyric writing but in his founding of the 'Creole Renaissance Festival'. According to the festival's website, 'the mission of the Creole Renaissance Organization is preserving Creole food, music and culture by providing education and cultural awareness within the community'. After its opening year in 2012, it was described by zydeco blog 'Zydeco Online' as 'bringing zydeco music and Creole culture to a new generation' (2013). Frank's changing personalities on his album covers and promotional material wherein he switches between wearing baggy jeans and a cap to cowboy boots and Stetson illustrates 'his refusal to choose between rural and urban… or between his Creole heritage and African-American popular culture' (Demars 2016: 11). Keith and Chris' range of sartorial choices highlights the way zydeco artists are 'complicating our understanding of the adorned black male body' (Leonard 2020: 136). Their changing dress and musical styles signify the heterogeneity of zydeco, resisting narrow constructions of Blackness which erase the diversity of the Black experience of the music.

Noting that 'Black style attempts to escape stereotypes, fixity, essentialization… and functions as a

process of identity formation', Miller argues that African American sartorial choice is a 'dialogic process that exists in relation to white dandyism at the same time it expresses, through its own internal logic, black culture' as cited in Leonard (2020: 139). The 'unashamedly hybrid character' of these black Atlantic cultures, as Gilroy describes them, 'continually confounds any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop-cultural betrayal' (1993: 99).

CONCLUSION

Whether it's through matching group shirts, exotic boots or saggy jeans, clothing remains a powerful tool for the communication of group identity and self-expression at trail rides in Southwest Louisiana and Eastern Texas. This chapter has explored these visual elements, how they are used to create a sense of cohesion and belonging and how they have evolved over time to incorporate diverse influences. I discussed how visual markers have been entangled in processes of racialization and how African Americans have sought to reclaim agency and control of their sartorial expressions. Contemporary zydeco aesthetics blend a range of influences and blur or outright reject the distinction between the urban and the rural, mirroring the dynamic and adaptive nature of Creole lifeways.

Beginning with a discussion on group shirts, I examined the bold and eye-catching designs crafted by trail ride groups. Their designs and colour schemes play an important social function, enabling a quick calculation of attendance at events, which is an important sign of mutual intergroup loyalty and respect. I showed how group shirts are a public reflection of group identity, and the same sensibilities that contribute to their design are incorporated into the paratexts created around events and deployed by groups. In this way, the immaterial elements of a group – vibe, culture, unity, ethos – are expressed in the material domain, in the very fabric of the clothing worn by group members.

I then attended to the prevalence of Western wear in the trail setting and its evolution from the primarily practical, to the decorative, eye-catching and performative. Glitzy decorations added for performative effect by rodeo riders and country music singers have brought femininity to this archetypal masculine base. Modern cowboys and cowgirls tend to dress for fashion over function with

exotic leather boots, studded jeans and buckles, and pearl snap shirts that are too expensive to expose to the rigours of a ranch and are rather chosen for the dancefloor or the bar.

This chapter continued by considering the popularity of Lil Nas X's song 'Old Town Road' amongst trail riders in 2019 and considered how the Black Yeehaw Agenda disrupts racialized archetypes around the 'American cowboy'. The song, and the Black Yeehaw Agenda more broadly, represents a rejection of the 'white, male, cisgender and colonial' (Elan 2020) myth of the American cowboy and what it has come to represent in popular culture. By releasing the song in the country billboards Lil Nas X found himself at the heart of a bigger debate about race and 'country' identity. As I illustrated, the negative and racist reaction recalls past racialised victimisation of adherents to particular fashion trends in the zoot suit riots of the 1940s.

The final section considered attempts to restrict and commodify Black aesthetics, as well as the resistance to these efforts. The contemporary trail ride scene thoroughly blends urban and rural aesthetics, resisting classification and rejecting narrow constructions of Blackness. As NBA players adopt nerd chic, a modern expression of Black dandyism that exaggerates intellectuality and refined grooming, as a sardonic response to league-imposed dress code, so zydeco artists reject attempts to impose a static, kitsch version of their traditional image, instead embracing their unique blend of hip hop and country. This process of sartorial self-empowerment, reclamation of identity and agency, and resistance to classification are strong themes throughout zydeco trail riding and part of the ongoing process of Black American history.

Chapter 4

‘I’M A HOG FOR YOU’:[95] EDIBLE ENTANGLEMENTS, MUTUAL AID AND ZYDECO GUMBO

You want hot pepper y’all, go Louisiana ya’ll

You want green pepper y’all, go Louisiana y’all

You want boudin y’all, go Louisiana y’all

Lyrics from ‘Hot Pepper’ by Roy Carrier (1998).[96]

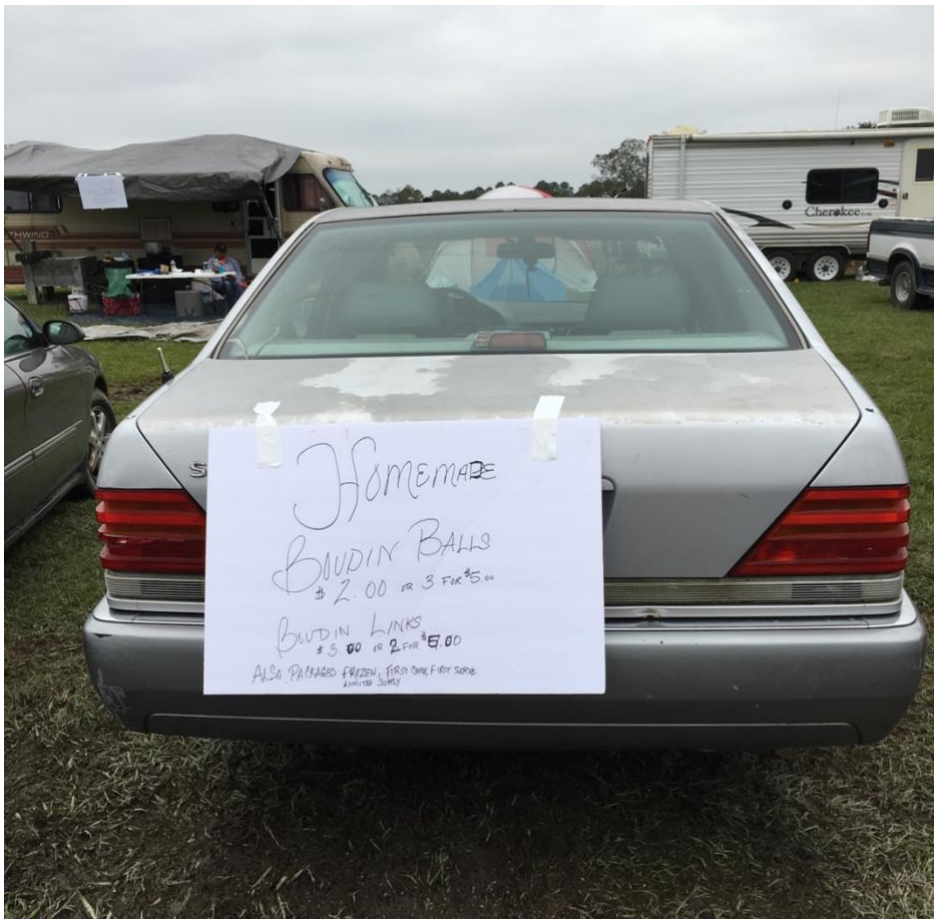


Figure 4.1 Homemade boudin for sale at the Avenue Breast Cancer ride, Parks LA. Source: Photo by author

[95] Title of a Clifton Chenier song released in 1991.
[96] https://open.spotify.com/track/1aXP2y6jAYPLFyLjKloBun?si=42c25505758440b8

2019

The parquet floor in True Friend Hall has a worn-out shine scuffed by decades of dancing feet. Above the bar, a hand-painted image depicting Black hands mid-handshake and encircled with laurel sprigs adorns the wall. On the adjacent wall hangs a framed and embroidered version of the same image. 'True Friends of LaPointe Benevolent Association 1906' has been sewn in gold lettering against a silk backdrop in deep red. The hall is hushed and empty but the chatter and din of the returning trail ride outside is beginning to fill the space. It is a late October afternoon in 2019 and I'm at Avenue Rider's annual breast cancer ride held at True Friend Hall in Parks. The hall is a short drive from Lake Martin and less than a hundred meters from the muddy waters of Bayou Teche which snakes its way south to join the Atchafalaya River at Morgan City. My short journey from Lafayette has taken me down long country lanes fringed with thick swampy vegetation and teaming with animal life. Kingfishers perch nonchalantly on power lines, turkey vultures circle overhead and the occasional turtle ventures out of a drainage ditch to attempt a precarious road crossing.

Today, the members of the Avenue Riders group are sporting pink t-shirts printed with ribbons to signify the ride's charitable cause. 'All our lives have been touched by some form of cancer[97]*' one of the group members tells me when I arrive at the main gate to pay for entry. It is one of the last rides in the Rainbow Association calendar for the season and many attendees are showing solidarity by donning pink in some form or other. One rider has even adorned her Quarter horse in a pink bridle and matching leg wraps to coordinate with her own pink gloves and shirt.*

Led by DJ Breadman, the ride has recently made its way back to its starting point and is spilling out across the field in front of the hall. The sense of arrival when a trail ride comes back to its starting point is always a heightened moment. Horse riders charge through the gates back to home base and may do a few glory laps around the parking field. People return to their pick-up trucks to rest their horses and possibly change shirts for the transition into the evening. Music is still coming from Breadman's truck but as the ride condenses into the one space, party wagons with their own

[97] In 2017 Louisiana had the 5th highest cancer mortality rate in the nation https://assets.americashealthrankings.org/app/uploads/ahr_case_studies_louisiana_120617.pdf

speakers join the sonic throng. The air is laced with a mouth-watering aroma coming from gumbo bubbling away in various black pots around the site. Someone is selling boudin balls from the trunk of their old Lincoln. Chris Ardoin and his band 'Zydeco NuBreeds' are sound-checking in an open sided barn out the back of the hall. The chank of Ardoin's accordion booms out, signalling the dancing will begin soon and people slowly trickle in from the field. I'm handed a steaming bowl of gumbo from Queliquia which I receive gratefully as the chill of the autumn evening sets in. Chicken falls off the bone in the thick brown gravy and the chunks of smoky andouille warm me from the inside out. I sway to the music on the spot with my nourishing meal watching dancing couples step and spin in the fading light.

INTRODUCTION

With a name deriving from the French Creole word for 'snap bean', zydeco has had a long and enduring relationship with food. Both zydeco and foodways are frequently cited as key cultural signifiers for rural Creoles in South Louisiana and are never found far from each other. Sharing and generosity are organising values in the Creole communities of South Louisiana and beyond. In the trail ride setting this is particularly realised through food where the sharing and exchange of such meat-based dishes as gumbo and cowboy stew continually generate and maintain a sense of belonging and community. In light of the region's long tradition of *boucheries*, this chapter will begin by discussing networks of edible exchange and commensality[98]. This will set the scene to then consider Louisiana's history of African American mutual aid and benefit associations (on the old sites of which many rides and zydeco dances are hosted). Mutual aid in the Americas was instigated by various kinds of institutional arrangements and they were often linked in powerful ways with religious societies to the point that they become indistinguishable. I will discuss how contemporary trail riding continues to serve as a site of community organised support and aid.

Food is a rich and complex arena that indexes identity and can paint a very particular history of a

[98] A communal tradition of slaughtering a hog and dividing the meat amongst the community

people. The term ‘gumbo’ for example is frequently applied to describe Louisiana’s ‘melting-pot’ population. Chef and object-oriented ontologist John Cochran notes food is 'the ultimate non-human actant intertwined within human collectives' (2011: 307). In Chapter 1, I explored deep companionship and tactile relationships with horses but trail riders are also profoundly and intimately connected to other animals through the embodied practise of consumption. How can we think about notions of trail rider ‘becoming’ through engagements and consumption of such creolized dishes as gumbo and what kind of contingent and relational histories does this activate? Previous work on food in the social sciences and humanities tends to focus on rituals through which food is made meaningful however Jane Bennett maintains ‘food writing seldom attends to the force of materiality’ and that it is rare to find food as an active and lively presence in such literature (2010: 43). I consider how we can think about food not just as an index of community identity but as an active tool for historic resistance, endurance and survival. How can we think about creolization across multiple domains? I end this chapter illustrating how edible entanglements overlap with zydeco’s history. I discuss the metaphorical interrelation between eating and listening to draw attention to the multiple senses that are stimulated through these different forms of consumption and how we can understand zydeco and all that it entangles, as ‘nourishment’.

‘YOU NEVER MEET A STRANGER’: COMMENSALITY & NETWORKS OF GENEROSITY

The rising sun is casting long shadows across Shane’s family farmyard. It has only just gone 7am and the sweet aroma of a roasting pig laces the fresh morning air. In an adjacent field, a pair of stout Quarter horses are grazing contentedly. Shane’s brother is tinkering with the engine of an old red Chevy pickup, the occasional clang of his spanner breaks the sleepy early idyll. I’m here to join the Boagni family for the butchering of a cow. Shane had called me a few days before with the invite, asking me to bring my camera and film the process. They intend on making a day out of it. After the butchering, they will serve up the *cochon de lait* for friends and family before heading out on an ‘old school’ trail ride as Shane described it, ‘taking us back to the roots’.

I'd awoken at 6am that morning with a call from Shane – 'where you at Gwen?' he'd asked. 'We killing the cow. You need to come film!'. 'It's 6am Shane!' I groggily protest and he chuckles, 'I've been up since 4am. Get on up here'. I throw my camera kit in the car and hit the quiet Saturday morning roads, cast pink in the early light. I head north up the I10, past Evangeline Downs race course and past Opelousas before I turn off at the Ville Platte exit. I continue past St Landry Parish tourist centre, the all-hours casino and the crossroads with the ramshackle-looking boudin stop. A sharp left onto a country lane takes me to the Boagni farmyard. It is barely 7:00am when I arrive but the pig has been roasting in a barbecue box pit since the small hours. Shane is busy making calls to local friends as I unload. He intends to livestream the event to Facebook and is keen to drum up an audience. In a small corral, a young cow nervously paces about. The band Zydeco Force plays from a speaker placed on the bonnet of an old Ford tractor and Andre, a neighbouring farmer, sharpens his butchery knives in time with the music. As discussed earlier in the thesis, Shane is the president of the trail ride group 'Barn Yard Posse' and they host a much loved and respected trail ride each year. Shane's public persona is important to him and his posts on social media continually celebrate and platform his rural life style and Creole culture. He reminds me of Barn Yard Posse's tagline – 'it started in the barn', which honors their agricultural roots and ongoing ties to the land.

Soon after I arrive, the cow is efficiently killed with a shot from a .22 calibre rifle between the eyes and then dragged out to the yard to be skinned. Everyone present mucks in, including Shane's two young sons who are unperturbed by the gory process. Once the skin is peeled back, the cow is cut open underneath laterally. Care is taken not to nick the guts or other organs that can spoil the meat. The entrails are carefully removed and organs such as the liver are harvested by Shane's father Red for specific dishes that will be prepared later. Once the blood has been hosed away, Red shows me about their vegetable patch. The beds are bursting with rows of green peppers, bright tomatoes and peaches hang heavily from a tree.

The *cochon de lait* is ready after that and as if on cue, local friends and family slowly start to drift in and join us. A gazebo is erected in the yard and a large fan dragged out to keep the air moving and flies away from the meal. We stand around the table pulling chunks off the pig and eating with our hands. The pork is tender and melts in the mouth. It has been cooking in a pit since 4.30am.



Figure 4.2 Shane's cochon de lait, Opelousas LA Source: Photo by author 2019

Conversation is halting as mouths are filled with tender salty chunks. The heat of the day is steadily climbing. Sweat trickles down my face as I tear small strips of warm flesh off the pig with my increasingly greasy fingers. We talk about the swing-out band that played in Opelousas the previous night and about Shane's plans for his forthcoming trail ride at Southern University's agriculture arena near Baton Rouge. Keith Frank and The Soileau Zydeco Band's album *Live at Slim's Y Ki Ki* (2014) is now playing on the speakers.[99] During an instrumental breakdown in the track 'Patate Douce', Frank gives a shout out to Barn Yard Posse before appealing to the audience.[100] 'Who else we got in here tonight? I wanna know. So, when I ask who you with, I wanna know who you ride for!' and the crowd goes wild.

Shane live-streams much of the morning to Facebook, reminding his viewers of 'how things are done in the country' and demonstrating that raising and growing what you eat is a quintessentially Creole characteristic. With lines like 'it started in the barn' and 'taking us back to the roots', Shane

[99] Slim's Y Ki Ki or just Slim's was an iconic zydeco dancehall in Opelousas
[100] https://open.spotify.com/track/4Yvaay6be5e6dZyX7fps19?si=40e13d3f2aa34245

connects his rural food and lifeways with notions of identity, heritage and ancestry. By live-streaming the butchering to social media, the day's activities become a performance of cultural continuation[101]. Reflecting on the low key and communal vibe of the day Shane tells me:

> It started here like this. People just coming out and having a good time, positive vibes and one thing led to another. Started having so many parties and people coming from all over to hang with us cooking, riding horses and we just took it to another level and started giving trail rides.[102]

Shane traces the roots of Barn Yard Posse's trail ride to days like described – people gathering to relax, eat and ride horses together. I ask Shane what he prefers to cook:

> Depends what trail ride and how long I'm gonna be there. If I'm gonna be there a while I'm gonna take some rooster or something like that I can really just cook and enjoy myself, take my time with it and spend the whole day cooking it because I haven't got anything else to do but just cook and watch my pot. I like some rooster or hen or something like that. Some beef or meat. It just depends on where we going and who's gonna be there and what those people enjoy eating.[103]

Eating at a trail ride is seen as an inherently social action and Shane centres his choice of food around the culinary preferences of who might be in attendance. Community wide meals have their roots in the *boucherie* which is an exceptional cooperative custom still maintained by Creoles and Cajuns alike in Southwest Louisiana. Involving the ritualized butchering of a hog (or cow) and distribution of the cuts of meat amongst local family and friends, the *boucherie* played an important role in supporting rural life at the community level. Historically, it ensured a fresh supply of meat to families at a time when the economy was 'largely self-sufficing, ice scarce and expensive, and the summers long and hot' (Smith and Post 1937: 336). Rural families subsequently had both fresh and cured meats with which to make many traditional dishes such as crackling, boudin and gumbo. Everything was

[102] Shane Boagni, discussion with author, Opelousas LA, July 2019
[103] Shane Boagni, discussion with author, Opelousas LA, July 2019

harvested as epitomised in the 1989 electric blues song by Nathan and The Zydeco Cha Chas 'Everything on the hog is good'.[104] The *boucherie* evokes an era of slow cooking and rural gatherings centered around sharing food and live music (someone would often be playing an accordion or fiddle). Whilst historically it functioned as a means of sustaining livelihoods and ensuring nourishment, Giancarlo suggests the contemporary *boucherie* 'serves to reemphasize ties of kinship and a shared cultural identity' (2020: 4). She describes it as but one element of a web of cultural practices which is deeply linked to present-day rural Creole identity (2020: 1). 'All of it works hand in hand with our culture that we have down here' Shane tells me. 'Zydeco music, the food, trail riding – it just represents us and what we stand for over here in Southwest Louisiana'.[105]

Sharing and an ethic of generosity are what Melissa Johnson has described as 'organising values of rural Creole culture' (2019:107). These values are clearly demonstrated at trail rides across the region. Networks of sharing and exchange amongst trail riders is a central aspect of the trail ride experience. These networks sustain community and forge a sense of belonging. A key way this is realised is through the sharing of food – particularly meat-based dishes such as gumbos, stews and barbecue pork sandwiches. As an essential element of human life, food has been a key area of study for social sciences and humanities which have studied both its biological and social significance. Rich webs of meaning are associated with foodways which take us beyond thinking about the nutritional value of food to how food is used to create meaning and relationships.

The creation of kin ties through the sharing of food has long been documented in anthropology. Sociologically, the act of eating together 'defines the limits of a group's culture' (Whit 2009: 53). Commensality, a term used by social scientists, is taken from Latin and literally means 'together at the same table'. More accurately, it describes the experience of people coming together over food in a common setting and is frequently depicted as creating and reinforcing social bonds amongst kin (Bourdieu 1984; Kerner, Chou & Warmind 2015; Fischler 2011). As food scholars Kerner and Chou put it, 'in a nutshell, commensality is the essence of food, and commensal acts are essential for the

[104] https://open.spotify.com/track/2PvwfHwt91t3FulXu2etk3?si=7a974c2871da49e4
[105] Shane Boagni, discussion with author, Opelousas LA, July 2019

integration of a society' (2015: 1). They stress that commensality is one of the most important articulations of human sociality[106]. In a similar vein, Fischler maintains 'in apparently all cultures, eating the same food is equated with producing the same flesh and blood, thus making commensals more alike and bringing them closer together' (2011: 533). Commensality 'preserves, revitalizes, builds up kinship or creates artificial kinship' (*ibid*: 533). The way we share food has also been shown to create intimacy. Miller, Rozin and Fiske have argued that *consubstantiation*, or the sharing of food that has had physical contact from another person, indicates greater closeness in personal relationships (1998). Many communal eating activities in Louisiana such as seafood boils or a *cochon de lait* requires everyone to eat with their fingers, licking off the spice and grease before you go in for another helping.

Used as a theoretical term, scholars in the social sciences and humanities have applied commensality to attend to the networks of relationships that enable a meal to be shared with others. Through her work in El Paso, Texas, Abarca (2021) has identified three different but overlapping understandings of commensality – *ancestral*, *embodied* and *responsible*. She uses the notion of 'ancestral commensality' to discuss how foodways connect us to ancestral knowledge. 'Embodied commensality' addresses how the senses, memory and the body are central to shifting one's diet away from industrialised, processed foods to reconnect with foods of ancestral heritage. 'Responsible commensality' is an approach guided by a commitment to fellowship and feeding others. Abarca shows how acts of commensality can infuse food with culturally specific symbolism and socio-economic realities, and transform cooking into 'an act of social responsibility' (*ibid*: 667). Food thus functions as a platform for social good, not just on a personal or familial level but at a community level. These concepts are useful to think through commensality in the trail ride environment where foods are often locally produced, connect to traditional Creole food practices and are generously shared around. Writing on African American foodways and Black identities, Psyche Williams-Forson

[106] Despite the positive social implications of *commensality*, it is a limited anthropocentric concept in that it is not commensal to the animals who were butchered for the meal. Commensality is therefore not commensurate between the different agents involved in the production of commensality, nor is it consensual, showing how the concept is still structured through various forms of asymmetry and domination.



Figure 4.3 Live Crawfish sign, Eunice LA. Source: Photo by author 2019

maintains that foods invoke a range of individual and collective memories. They 'reveal cultural traditions and culturally transmitted values that govern societies far and wide. Food events, with specific delicacies, have tremendous power to define social organizations as well as cultural and social identities' (2007: 127). The sense of being part of Trail Ride Nation is continually cultivated and maintained through networks of sharing and these networks have become a tenet of trail ride ethos and mentality.

On a cool April evening I catch up with Lance at the Texas Regulator trail ride in Cheek. I'd met Lance back in 2014 at a ride in Ville Platte with his wife and young children, at which time he was the president of the Texas Regulators. Back then, he had emphasized the close-knit familial nature of the activity and the continued importance of 'keeping the culture going'. We are sitting in fold out chairs by the front gate as a steady stream of pickup trucks arrives for the evening entertainment, dust flying in their bright headlights. In a large striped canvas tent, the Saturday night dance is getting underway. It is the height of crawfish season so I've bought a $10 box from Tony who is selling boiled crawfish from the back of his pickup truck by the dance tent. As I listen to Lance, I'm also concentrating on shelling my crawfish. It is a skill I have not quite honed at this point and instead of achieving a clean

peel, occasionally stab my fingers on their sharp tails. I chew the white flesh and suck the remaining juice from the head – as I've learned from watching locals. An earthy and slightly muddy taste is accompanied by a fiery kick of paprika. Lance, who works in oil and gas, has offered me a beer and we are talking about the things that make trail riding so special for its participants:

> It's because of the environment it's bringing. You are outside, in the elements. You have all sorts of people from all walks of life enjoying the same thing, you can walk ten steps and get a different piece of food from somebody you don't even know, you can grab a beer from someone you don't even know and have a conversation and people enjoy those things… And that's what people are drawn to. You don't meet a stranger.[107]

Along with the enjoyment of being outside in the elements, Lance conjures the communal and welcoming environment that is pervasive at trail rides. 'You don't meet a stranger' is a phrase I hear a lot. Queliquia, also from the Texas Regulators, similarly captures this spirit as we talk about tradition, community and kindness:

> You can be coming back in from the ride and you be going to the vendor for something to eat and somebody pull you out, 'we cooked over here, y'all want something to eat?'. It's things like that, the selfless part of trail riding that makes it the peace of mind. There is nothing in the world like trail riding. Nothing can touch it because it is something special, and that's why we defend it so much with the tradition… It's not just about getting on a horse or pulling a wagon. This culture, this lifestyle instils a certain value and appreciation in treating people with human acts of kindness. If you hungry, I'm gonna feed you. Regardless you paid for this deer sausage in this black pot or not, I'm gonna give it to you. You thirsty? I got a bottle of water. You go on a ride and not even know these people, may I use your porta-potty on your wagon? I always say, there's no stranger in trail riding. You have people that are no blood relation that will come concrete family over the years and you couldn't tell them no different.[108]

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[107] Lance, discussion with author, Cheek TX, April 2019
[108] Queliquia Darden, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.



Figure 4.4 Homemade pork crackling at Semien Stables annual trail ride, Lake Charles. Source Photo by author 2019

Queliquia describes trail riding ethos as 'selfless'. It is a lifestyle that instils values of kindness and generosity and acts as a moral compass for how to live life and treat those around you – values that become cultural. As she articulates, over time people become family. Chee-Beng's work on 'hospitality commensality' (2015) is relevant here. Hospitality commensality 'may express symbolic capital and cultivate social relation, but the immediate aim is really to celebrate a social relation and to give hospitality and show friendship' (2015: 15). This kind of commensality is extended outside family or friends to show friendship and solidarity. Chee-Beng notes being treated to food and eating together over time 'cultivates a moral relationship of solidarity, which the hospitality obliges one to uphold' (*ibid*: 15).

Sharing food becomes a key aspect of building my own entrance into the world of trail riding. From gumbo at trail rides, to attending Thanksgiving or Easter dinners, birthdays, community events or *boucheries*, the strongest friendships and ties I make during my fieldwork involve sharing food, particularly with the Texas Regulators and the three generations of family I get to know through them.

Writing on the pride both Creole women and men in Southwest Louisiana take in their cooking, Maida Owens describes how every gathering becomes a 'food event' (2000). Enjoying opportunities to show off their culinary skills, family food events become social functions. Through food, 'families maintain a sense of generation and extension. Older family members pass family lore to the younger ones, and individuals learn about their cultural identity as well as about their nieces, cousins, and aunts' (Owens 2000).

Alcide Lewis, father to Texas Regulator president Ashley, is adamant about the centrality of food at Black Creole social occasions. I had met Al at a family event in Church Point, Louisiana in early 2019. Having just eaten a box of crawfish boil, Al asked me whether I was now ready to eat something 'proper' and handed me a generous plateful of home-made ox tail stew with red beans and rice. When I catch up with Al at the Texas Regulator ride some years later (2022), he is standing in front of the biggest wood-fired smoker I have ever laid eyes on. A homemade 250-gallon double-barrelled affair with a large open stove at one end which billows smoke from the wood fire within (see Figure 4.5). He has been tending the fire in preparation to cook turkey legs and pork steak sandwiches to sell at the ride. The meat has been marinating for two days to make sure the seasoning gets 'all the way to the bone' as Al describes. Whilst for some zydeco is at the heart of trail riding, and for others it may be horses, it is food that remains at the centre of the experience in Al's opinion:

> On any trail ride, whilst they go for a good time, food is the heart of it. They go for the food – there are different vendors there with different food. When you leave your house to go to a trail ride, you want something with a little flare and spice, maybe something you can't get at home.[109]

As a passionate cook, Al will usually be found behind a barbecue or black pot at a trail ride. One of his favourite things to make is a *sauce piquant*, a popular Creole and Cajun dish consisting of a spicy tomato-based stew made with chicken or sausage and served over rice. Al takes pride in the fact he can make a flavoursome *sauce piquant* using barely any salt at all, citing his use of spices and herbs

[109] Alcide Lewis, discussion with author, Cheek TX, April 2022



Figure 4.5 Pork steaks and turkey legs in Al's wood-fired smoker, Cheek TX. Source: Photo by author 2022

as the secret. ‘When you love doing what you do, you never need to taste anything, never measure anything’. He stokes the fire and checks the heat on the grill before settling back down into his fold out chair. Al is warm and friendly and always greeting me in person or over the phone by exclaiming ‘hello jolly old chap!’ in his best English accent, which he picked up during a trip to London whilst serving in the US military. Originally from Church Point, Louisiana, after his stint in service Al settled in Beaumont, Texas for the booming work opportunities in steel plants[110]. The first time we are introduced, he proudly reveals that he fabricated the cap that stemmed the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010. Working with over forty kinds of steel, he continues to make parts for the oil and gas industries and more recently for the US Department of Defense.

Growing up in a large family, Al tells me that everyone knew how to cook. Losing his dad aged five, Al explains he ‘was raised and taught to be a man by women — by my mum and sisters who were all strong and independent’. With the guidance of his older sisters, he was stuffing pork roasts

[110] The steel, oil and gas industry in Texas sparked a large migration of Creoles from Southwest Louisiana in search of employment opportunities.

from the age of eleven. ‘Sunday is *the* meal’ he says. Sunday dinners were and still are, the main family meal. A time when everyone can get together, to unwind after church, ‘to chill out and rest and bond with family and friends’ as Al describes. Writing about food in the American South Pamela Kittler and Kathryn Sucher maintain food has traditionally been a catalyst for social interaction and southern hospitality is renowned. ‘Food is lovingly prepared for family and friends. The sharing of food is considered an important factor in the cohesiveness of southern black society’ (1989: 191).

The heat in the smoker has reached optimal temperature at this point. Al pulls a large zip-lock bag full of marinated pork steaks from a cooler and begins to slap them onto the grill. The meat hisses and smokes as it meets the hot surface. His ease and comfort with cooking at a large scale is evident. As he leaves the steaks to cook, he relates how he is regularly involved in local benefits and more often than not, in a cooking capacity. He cooked for twelve hundred people right after Hurricane Laura ripped through Beaumont, leaving many locals in what he described as borderline dire straits with no utilities. ‘I’m a firm believer in paying it forward’ he says frankly, ‘when life has been good to you, you are supposed to pass it on’.[111]

As demonstrated by the likes of Al, Lance and Queliquia, values of commensality and generosity extend far beyond one’s immediate family. As mentioned in my introduction, the church has played a large role in fostering such values as a continued source of strength and community for many African Americans in Southwest Louisiana and Eastern Texas, along with the regions long history of mutual aid societies. In the next section, I’ll discuss how African American mutual aid societies have provided imperative medical and financial support for families across the region before going on to consider how trail riding functions as a contemporary site of community organized support and aid.

‘ONE HAND WASHES THE OTHER’: MUTUAL AID AND BENEFIT

The IFBS Lodge, home of the Inseparable Friends’ Benevolent Society, sits on a bend of Bayou Teche. Despite its close proximity to the interstate, it can be easily missed. Take the Creswell Lane

[111] Alcide Lewis, discussion with author, Cheek TX, April 2022



Figure 4.6 Hands depicted mid-shake at True Friends Hall, home of the True Friends of LaPointe Benevolent Association established 1906, Parks LA. Source: Photo by author

exit off the I49 and wiggle east along the LA31, past Creole Conjure Rootwork where Madame Elle, voodoo-hoodoo priestess provides spiritual healing and 'hex removal' services. The lodge is set back from the road not much further along on your left-hand side. If you hit the Dollar General in Leonville then you've driven too far.

A one-story brick building with a gentle sloped roof, the IFBS lodge was founded in 1906 to help local farming communities at a time when there was no official government support structure. With no hospitals, no welfare and no social security, it was a harsh life trying to make a living on the land at the turn of the century. *Kreol* magazine describes the history of the lodge as 'an all-American tale of digging-in with heroic acts of unselfishness towards one's fellow man; of a society with tight-knitted social bonds that have since spread all over America' (Dhillon 2016). Although, like many mutual aid and benefit societies, it was established as a male-only organisation, a women's auxiliary was later added to 'strengthen its community ties for better service' (*ibid*: 2016). The organisation remains engaged in helping local community by supporting non-profit organisations and participating in fundraisers for those who are sick or in need of assistance. With its adjacent large open-sided barn and ample field space, the lodge is also a popular site for hosting trail rides and zydecos.

It is not uncommon for trail rides to be hosted on the grounds of old African American fraternal societies – a timely reminder of those harsher times when being Black in Louisiana meant being prohibited equal access to an array of basic rights. In light of their continued capacity to fulfil a critical social and financial role, it is vital to appreciate trail riding within a broader historical framework of Black mutual aid and benevolent societies. Mutual aid societies were common in communities of Africans and African descendants throughout the Americas (see Braga 1987 or Miller 2009). The history of African American provisioning has been long documented and these societies provide a powerful historical antecedent to contemporary trail riding.

Mutual aid and benevolent associations were a crucial means of medical and financial assistance at a time when the state offered little in the way of public welfare. They played an essential role in supporting families through sickness, hard times and the costs of death. Members paid small weekly or monthly dues which in turn ensured them financial support in the event of sick health or funeral costs. Combining financial aid and fraternalism, mutual aid societies 'provided a collective mechanism for averting economic catastrophe' (Greenbaum 1991: 96). In the US, Black fraternal groups surged after the Civil War and again after Reconstruction when once-enslaved African Americans were forced into long struggles for citizenship rights. The number of groups increased again in the early 20th century when oppressive Jim Crow laws further marginalized African Americans and denied them the right to vote, to get jobs, to get an education and many other fundamental rights. Whilst slavery, racial terror and segregation thwarted civic ties between Black and white communities, research has shown that African Americans consistently joined these fraternal organizations, and were far more likely than whites 'to join voluntary associations and participate in many kinds of civic activities' (Skocpol & Oser 2004: 369). In his 1944 *An American Dilemma,* Gunnar Myrdle maintained that African Americans were passionate voluntary organizers, echoing the findings of earlier pioneering scholars of Black civic life such as W.E.B Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, who suggested African Americans had a strong tendency to form mutual aid groups connected to churches and neighbourhoods (*ibid*: 369). Worth noting the mutuality of these societies didn't include everyone in the community with women's ones springing up later than men's.

Mutual aid and benevolent societies also functioned to 'maintain social ties and cultural identity'

(Greenbaum 1991: 96). Their stream of revenue not only took care of the societies' obligations towards their members, but was also used to build the likes of meeting halls, schools, hospitals and fund social activities. The meeting halls of mutual aid societies served multiple social and recreational purposes – from music and dances, lectures to community meetings. They could also be rented for wedding receptions and parties acting as both 'community centers and income producing real estate investments' (*ibid*: 96). Revenue accrued from the payment of individual dues was spent on developing social activities which in turn generated further revenue from admissions. Greenbaum notes 'the result was a micro-economy in which surpluses were partially redistributed within the group in the form of individual benefits, communal activities and collectively owned resources' (*ibid*: 96). The value of these early self-help organisations should not be underestimated. Not only did they provide their members with some financial security and source of recreation, but they promoted community pride and a sense of self-worth. As Gale Par asserts 'the benevolent associations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offer shining examples of self-help, racial uplift, community building, and cultural innovation (2016: 27).

Mutual aid is rooted in ideas of self-management and a spirit of solidarity and reciprocity. In addition to the financial support these groups offered to their members, they also regularly enacted rituals which stressed shared values and identities. They 'have performed genuinely "civic" functions in that they participate in parades and other public occasions, support education and community service, maintain halls that are also used by other groups, and from time to time get involved in legislative or policy campaigns' (Skocpol & Oser 2004: 370). Public parades remain an important feature for many of these societies in New Orleans, as expressed through the city's rich 'second line' tradition. Second line parades are organized and financed by African Americans to celebrate the anniversaries of their social clubs and benevolent societies. These musical street parades are also performed to mark the loss of community members in what have become known outside New Orleans as 'jazz funerals'. The parades are led by the club and a brass band, known as the 'first line' and followed by a 'second line' of family, friends, members of other clubs and followers. Through the transformative experience of the parade, Helen Regis suggests participants become '*owners of the streets*' (1999: 478). Paraders choose routes that reflect community memory, respectability, tradition,

social ties and the local economy (Regis 1999). Giancarlo (2016) has drawn a clear parallel to trail rides which occur on public roadways allowing for 'increased visibility' (and audibility as I've argued in chapter 2) for an otherwise marginalised group.

The Steady Steppin trail ride group hold their annual ride at the Inseparable Friend's Benevolent Society lodge, generally in late July. Since the riders have already set off by the time I arrive, I join Jarvis from Live @ 5 Ryders under the shade of a small gazebo in the field. Jarvis's trail ride group is less than a year old at this point and he's building up to host his first annual trail ride in the coming fall. Sharing salty Popeyes fried chicken he talks me through the mechanics of running a trail ride group:

> We are part of the Rainbow Association and that's where you can get a list of riders or riding clubs and then you can see your support. The Rainbow Association has got thirty-two clubs in it. If three to five members of each club come to your ride, it's going to be a successful ride. Let's be real, you can't operate a trail ride club purely out of love. You need money. You wanna show love - you go to a ride, you meet people, you get connections. You might be somewhere where you might need a ride or a tow truck, somebody will help you out, 'oh Rainbow Association Live @ 5 Ryders? I got you, what you need?'. I mean one hand washes the other.[112]

The Rainbow Association is a network of trail ride groups based predominantly in Southwest Louisiana, with a couple further afield in Southeast Texas and north Louisiana. As Jarvis explains, for each ride to be a success, it needs a decent turn-out to cover the overhead costs. A zydeco band alone can cost in the region of $3000 and then there are the costs of venue hire, event permits and security. Attending trail rides is not just a way of upholding a cultural tradition and social life but attendance also supports the organisation that is hosting that ride. Hosting and attending trail rides also puts participants within a network of people who help each other out – 'one hand washes the other' as Jarvis describes it.

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[112] Jarvis Bowie, discussion with author, Leonville LA, June 2019

The deep-fried chicken is long from hot but its saltiness tastes good in the summer heat and I'm appreciating washing it down with a watery Michelob Ultra. In addition to helping each other out, Jarvis is eager to articulate the ways trail ride groups 'give back' to their wider community:

> That will set you apart from doing the right thing and not doing the right thing, if everybody gave back. I mean we do a 'back to school' fundraise giveaway. It's going out purchasing school supplies for the kids in communities with low incomes. We'll set up in a park, we'll cook, there will be free food and we hand out book sacks and supplies. Maybe twenty kids come and they see that, and maybe that will carry on through their life, they'll return it to somebody else, give back.[113]

Jarvis discusses the importance of setting an example to the younger generation to instill the same ethic of care and generosity. In addition to their school drive, Live @ 5 Ryders cook regular community meals in Alexandria where they are based. Groups like Live @ 5 Ryders and many others under the Rainbow Association are driven by what Giancarlo has described as a 'civic-minded passion' (2016: 240), differentiating themselves from the trail riding groups with a short-lived existence and motivations more focused on finance. These groups remain committed to community involvement and community-organized aid with actions ranging from school drives, community meals and fundraisers for medical bills and scholarship initiatives for college students.

In 2019, nearly a fifth of Louisiana's population were living in deep poverty, impacting women, children and people of colour disproportionately[114]. This ranked it the state with the second highest poverty rate in the US after neighbouring Mississippi. The year before, Opelousas was the area with the highest poverty rate in Louisiana with a staggering 40% of its residents (75% of whom are African American) living below the poverty line[115]. In light of these dismal statistics, community-organised support and benefits play a vital role. At the end of the 2019 trail ride season, the Rainbow Trail Ride Association awarded five students with a cheque of $500 each to contribute towards college expenses.

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[113] Jarvis Bowie, discussion with author, Leonville LA, June 2019
[114] www.census.gov
[115] https://www.labudget.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/LBP-Census-2019.pdf



Figure 4.7 A member of No Limit Riders wears a breast cancer themed group shirt in support of Avenue Rider's 'Breast Cancer Ride', Parks LA Source: Photo by author 2019

During the award ceremony, which was held at a community centre in north Lafayette, the association's secretary made a short speech about the importance of helping African American students make a better life for themselves. 'It's a blessing' she said to the attendees 'that we are not sending money somewhere like a prison or a jail but that we are actually able to give back to the community'.[116]

At its best, Trail Ride Nation serves as a site with a political dimension, creating a space where all will be welcomed and fed – an alternate world that seeks to remedy the ills of contemporary American society. In addition to celebration, the rides are about cohesiveness, sharing, and collective support. This kind of civic-minded care is not just demonstrated by trail ride groups but also zydeco musicians who will often give their time to play at fundraisers or benefit concerts which support

[116] According to the non-profit, non-partisan 'Prison Policy Initiative', Louisiana has an incarceration rate of 1,094 per 100,0000 people, meaning that it locks up 'a higher percentage of its people than any democracy on earth'. Whilst African Americans are not even a third of Louisiana's population, they disproportionately make up 66% of Louisiana's prison population.

community members or other musicians. At the time of writing there were forthcoming benefit concerts being held for zydeco musicians Jeffrey Broussard to pay for medical care and Major Handy whose home had been destroyed by a fire. As one research participant explained 'that's the unique beauty of the zydeco world, when something major happens we come together and help each other'.[117]

The history of mutual aid in Louisiana, along with African American civic-minded care, has deep roots in the violent histories of the transatlantic slave trade and plantocratic life. From these experiences of coerced transport and racial terror, unique food, language and music ways emerged as a means of subaltern survival. In the next section I will be delving further into this creolized history through the lens of gumbo to understand the divergent roots of the dish and how entanglements with plants and animals became a means of both survival and every day resistance, specifically asking, what does it mean to consider creolization across multiple domains simultaneously that includes multiple entities?

GUMBO, ENTANGLED HISTORIES & SURVIVAL

As the main star of Louisiana's renowned cuisine, it would be easy to mistake gumbo as a year-round meal. Instead, the region's signature dishes tend to be closely tied to seasonal foods and local celebrations. Southwest Louisiana, or Acadiana as the area is also known, has four diverse terrain types that generate a seasonal production of crops and seafood including rice, sugar cane, sweet potatoes, crawfish, and catfish. These terrain types are the grassy prairies; the marshes of the coastal region; the fertile land found along the levees of rivers and bayous and the swamps (or Atchafalaya Basin); and the Gulf coast providing the likes of shrimp, oysters, and crab (Guttierez 1983). As described to me by a local chef, the year ends and starts with 'Gulf oyster season', as spring comes it's 'crawfish season', with the onset of summer there's 'Gulf shrimp season' and then finally, as the long, hot summer comes to an end, the cool of fall brings 'gumbo season'.

[117] Anonymous, discussion with author, September 2019

The excitement of gumbo season is palpable. The endless months of oppressive humidity and persistent hurricane warnings finally ease in early October, the mosquitos back off and spending time outside again no longer feels like a feat of endurance. As cooler, calmer days blow in, the black pots come out. Smoke rising into chilly evening air becomes a regular scene at trail rides along with the taste of an oily hearty gumbo warming you from inside to out. A culinary cacophony of flavours, spices and textures, gumbo is a defining dish of Louisiana and one claimed by Creoles and Cajuns alike. A thick stew that can be made with a variety of meats and seasonings, gumbo is the culmination of more than three hundred years of cultural sharing, borrowing and influence. Filé powder (dried and ground sassafras leaves) used to thicken gumbo is the Native American contribution to this dish, the dark roux base is originally French, and ingredients such as okra (also used to thicken the stew) originate from Africa. Whilst the dish's exact ingredients vary depending on region and the cook's ancestry, its popularity and place at the heart of Louisiana's culinary identity remains strong.

Gumbo is a word that has extended not only to mean the dish but also denote any kind of 'mixture' and in particular, Louisiana's 'melting-pot' population. Kittler and Sucher note that 'food habits are so intrinsic to culture that food-related images are often used to describe them' (1989: 23). Similarly, Schofield notes that writers often use food 'as a rhetorical structure that allows them to articulate abstract, internal, and difficult to express concepts; the food rhetoric identifies the ineffable qualities of life' (as cited in Lopez Ropero 2009: 86). Food can index identity and paint the history of very particular groups of people. Gumbo, with its melting of culinary traditions, can be drawn on as a material metaphor 'for the multiracial, hybrid, and intricate racial and social reality' in Louisiana (Parascioli 2010: 454). Gumbo is widely perceived as a metonymical expression of a multiracial community 'that has positively embraced the otherwise complex and often painful processes of creolization and hybridization' (*ibid*: 451). World-famed festivals, a state-wide open container law,[118] and jaunty slogans like '*laissez les bon temp rouler*', reinforce these ideas and paint Louisiana as a place of culinary and musical indulgence and non-stop good times. Due to its nebulous hybridity, the

[118] The law makes it legal to walk around in public with open containers of alcohol.



Figure 4.8 Gumbo boils in a black pot at a trail ride in, Ville Platte. Source: Photo by author 2019

dish apparently transcends cultural barriers, whilst arguably erasing cultural origins.

Gumbo's history is one that is deeply rooted in the terror and violence of the Middle Passage and whose very name derives from *guingombo,* a Bantu word for okra (Lopez-Ropero 2009). Much like the word 'creolization' (as discussed in my literature review), the term has been loosened from its origins and applied to denote any sort of metaphorical 'melting pot', which speaks to the erasure of power dynamics and unresolved tensions around race and cultural identity in Louisiana. Parascioli suggests that terms like 'melting pot' and 'gumbo' have been used as a post-racial fantasy Louisiana – one free of racial or class tension with everyone united around traditional cooking (2010). As with the development of musical forms like zydeco, the origins of Louisiana Creole cuisine are closely tied to the history of the transatlantic slave trade, when African staples such as yams, okra, and black-eyed peas made their way into plantation colonies along with human cargo (Lopez-Ropero 2009). During the same era pigs, goats, cattle and chickens were bought from the African and European continents over to the Americas.

In plantation houses and slave quarters, African cooks 'combined African crops, foods and cooking techniques – deep fat frying – with local and European ones, creating a "creole" cuisine that was no longer identifiably African or European' (Burton as cited in Lopez-Ropero 2009: 84). All slaves had something to do with food (and by extension, animals and plants) in plantocratic life, whether its production, processing or preparation. In *The Cooking Gene* (2017) Michael W. Twitty understands food as one of many aspects of African American identity that represents an unbroken line from Africa to present day America. He focuses on food as part of the lived experience of enslaved Africans and as an element of a shared Black American cultural DNA. 'This does not start with race and end with commodities, it starts with commodities and ends with race' maintains Twitty, referencing cash crops such as rice and sugar. 'These crops shaped the way that people (the enslaved and their owners) lived. They shaped the diet' (as cited in Terry 2020).

Sidney Mintz shows that foods have histories, not just associated with those who have eaten them but also the means used to find, process and prepare such foods. Given the central importance of food for all peoples, he maintains that 'it is not surprising that what the slaves got to eat, what they could produce or catch to eat, and how they came to create a cuisine of their own became building block features of slave culture' (1996: 36). Food is never just eaten. Its consumption is imbued with symbolic meaning with its own history:

> Eating is not merely a biological activity, but a vibrantly cultural activity as well. Under slavery, this activity, like all else in slave life, had to be rebuilt and endowed anew with structure and meaning, by the slaves themselves. Slavery shredded the whole of the material life of its victims, penetrating the very cell of the family, tearing people loose from their cultures, lands, and kin groups. But in the New World the slaves remade their lives culturally. They drew upon their ultimate resources as human beings, and they succeeded by struggle in keeping their humanity intact. (Mintz 1996: 49)

The diets of those enslaved were scanty and dependent on food provided by the master which often consisted of leftovers or undesirable parts of an animal not favoured by the Plantation owners. Supplementing their meagre diet with hunting and growing became a vital means of sustenance and survival for those enslaved. Despite the large-scale cultivation of a single crop in the plantation era,

Judith Carney demonstrates how the plantation agricultural system was not totalizing. Unproductive areas of land and 'dooryard' gardens gave enslaved Africans the opportunity to grow food for their own survival. In contrast to the large swathes of land sown to commodity crops, 'slave food plots were reservoirs of agrobiodiversity where they cultivated plants from two continents in dense, multi-layered assemblages' (Carney 2021: 1076). These modest sites 'provided crucial spaces where enslaved Africans and their descendants creolized the agronomic heritages of the Old and New World tropics (*ibid*: 1076). Such enclaves of subsistence and agrobiodiversity disrupted plantation commodity monocultures and ensured essential nutrition to preserve life. Fruit trees, root crops and medical plants were interplanted and 'organized as actively managed polycultures' (*ibid*: 1080). Not only were these slave subsistence plots sites of subaltern survival but also sites of resistance and liberation. Independent food plots enabled not only space for growing food and supplementing diets but also 'provided a bedrock upon which slaves built hard-won rights, such as unsupervised time to tend plots and the right to independent production' (*ibid*: 1094)

In a similar vein, Monique Allewaert explores 'the creation of alternate ways of being that emerge in the context of the black experience of enslavement and post-emancipation oppression, but that constitute their own creative agency on the edges of plantation slavery' (Johnson 2019: 13). In her work *Ariel's Ecology*, Allewaert looks at how relational ways of being were crafted as a means of resistance by those who were not counted as humans. Allewaert makes an argument about alternative understandings of personhood in plantation spaces:

> The economic, disciplinary, and agricultural systems that made the Americas cultures of social death were not simply sites of tragedy and loss. Bodies and persons pulled apart, trespassed, and brutalized in these regions produced modes of story (parahuman tales), artifactual creation (fetishes), and fantasy (of decomposing and recomposing bodies) that gave rise to a minoritarian mythos of the Americas in which the autonomy of parts engenders new fusings. In this mythos, diversification and diversity became the originary American story. (2013: 25)

Allewaert explores the tension between understanding creolization as a cultural phenomenon but also a material and ontological phenomenon. As a cultural phenomenon, the paradigm allows for new and

divergent traditions to emerge from the cross-cultural connections made by people in the colonies. Materially speaking, she describes how plants, animals, substances and agencies 'interacted in and thus composed a given place, as well as the economic conditions particular to this place, produced bodies and forms of personhood in which diversification became primary (2013: 6). Allewaert's work, along with Carney's, is valuable when considering how non-human and material agents became intrinsic elements in processes of creolization. The symbolic power of Creole cuisine is thus rooted in a relationship with the natural environment and historic modes of survival. The history of gumbo tells the story of not just a regional cuisine but how people, plants, animals, substances, agents were thrown together in plantation spaces.

Southern Black cuisine or 'soul food' has become a source of racial pride and remains a significant cultural creation of African Americans. Despite its positive connotations, soul food remains a complex terrain exactly because of its ties to slavery (see Elijah Muhammad 1967) and also its unhealthy quality. Earlier in this chapter, I demonstrated how meat-based dishes such as gumbo perform a vital task in reproducing social bodies through acts of commensality and sacrifice. Like other foods, 'meats participate in the construction of relationships between people and between people and places, not least through their effects on human bodies' (Stapes & Klein 2017: 199). The tension and competing narratives around traditional 'soul food' have been explored by a number of scholars and African American cooks in recent decades (Williams Forson 2006; Nettles 2007; Bock 2017; Terry 2009). Kimberly Nettles notes that on the one hand, soul food or Black southern cuisine has been linked to 'notions of family, love and community – to the idea that black people, struggling under the yoke of slavery and the post-slavery experiences of sharecropping, Jim Crow racism… and discrimination could at least rely on the comforts of the traditional foods that solidified their relationships with one another in the face of adversity' (2007: 108). At the same time these foods, which can be high in fat, cholesterol and sodium, 'have become prime culprits in rising rates of obesity, Type II diabetes, coronary heart disease, and hypertension' (*ibid*: 108). Soul food can thus be constructed as a source of comfort and discomfort at individual and community levels (Bock 2017: 164). Writing on the 'force' of food and the obesity crisis, Bennett highlights how eating shows us as bodies *in process* – bodies that will change and transform depending on what we eat. Eating is 'the

formation of an assemblage of human and nonhuman elements, all of which bear some agentive capacity… In the eating encounter, all bodies are shown to be but temporary congealments of a materiality that is a process of becoming, a hustle and flow punctuated by sedimentation and substance' (Bennett 2010: 49). To recognise food as a true force, especially in the Southern context, is to pay attention to the networks in which consumption practices are located. In the words of Cohen Ferris:

> Food is entangled in forces that have shaped southern history and culture for more than four centuries. The cultural processes associated with food – production, regulation, representation, identity, and consumption – have taken on aliases such as agriculture, animal science, civil rights, consumption, decorative arts, domesticity, drink, economy, exchange, garden, horticulture, hunger, malnutrition, marketplace, nutrition, obesity, pottery, poverty, property, reform, segregation, slavery, starvation, sustenance, terroir, trade, and wealth. When we study food in the South we unveil a web of social relations defined by race, class, ethnicity, gender, and shifting economic forces. (2009: 4)

One of the key cultural processes associated with food in Southwest Louisiana is zydeco music. In the next section I draw this chapter to a close by considering the interrelation between food and zydeco music. I ask, how does zydeco celebrate local food practices and what kind of nourishing possibilities are available through the consumption of music?

ZYDECO GUMBO[119]

It is sunset by the time the Texas Regulator trail ride has stormed its way back to the Leday arena in Cheek, Southeast Texas. The pounding of the horses' hooves on the ground, along with the deep tread of pickup truck tires, has kicked up a cloud of dust which adds a grainy quality to the fading light. Whilst the ride has been out, the Leday arena has been transformed in preparation for the evening's entertainment. Food vendors have arrived and the number of trucks in the field has doubled as people

[119] Title of a song by Brian Jack and the Zydeco Gamblers (2004)

trickle in for a night of local food, zydeco and dancing. The smell of BBQ lures me back over to Al's wood-fired smoker and I run my eyes over the hand-written menu taped to the side of his stall. Leon Chavis is sound-checking on the open-air stage and Al bounces along in time as he serves turkey legs, pork steak and boudin to a growing queue of people. Later in the evening, when there is a lull in customers, Al will describe how trail rides began in Southwest Louisiana as a collective means of helping out neighbouring sharecroppers with their harvests. He'll tell me there would have always been an accordion present and the kids would 'kill the grass' with their dancing. He'll reminisce about the zydeco dances that were hosted at church, where the gumbo was cooked in black pots big enough to climb into. And then, Al will insist on sending me off with a plate of steaming turkey necks, which he tells me I 'need to try'.

Zydeco and cooking are rallying points for Creole pride and identity (Spitzer 2003) and the two go hand in hand in Southwest Louisiana. As Owens maintains, any event in Southwest Louisiana is 'a food event' (2000). With food and music being cornerstones of both Creole and Cajun identity, many local food events are also music events. The interrelation between music, food and place in Southwest Louisiana is celebrated at the regions multitude of food festivals, which all have strong musical components. The city of Crowley hosts an annual rice festival boasting three nights of top zydeco and Cajun bands. The festival describes rice as a 'cornerstone' which the community economy is built on. The municipality of Scott has an annual *boudin* festival and similarly programmes three days of music with popular local acts like Lil Nathan & The Zydeco Big Timers and Chris Ardoin & NuStep Zydeco playing headline slots on the Friday and Saturday nights. The town of Breaux Bridge hold their Crawfish Festival in May which features crawfish *étouffée* cook-offs, crawfish eating contests, a zydeco dance contest and three days of live music from zydeco and Cajun bands. In addition to annual festivals there are the region's weekly trail rides where food and music remain an absolute backbone. These occasions exemplify zydeco's long relationship with food, local agriculture and rural lifeways.

Zydeco's close connection to foodways is celebrated in many of the genre's songs. Food-themed lyrics have been pervasive in zydeco throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For example, Queen Ida, notably the first woman to lead a zydeco band, details local cuisine in her song 'Cajun Cookin' (1994). She outlines the ingredients of gumbo in the first verse before listing regional

favourites such as jambalaya, crawfish and pecan pie in her cheery chorus. For Queen Ida, Southern food becomes a signifier of regional identity and pride. Other popular examples include: 'Give Him Cornbread' (Beau Joque); 'Hot Pepper' (Roy Carrier); 'Don't Go in That Pot' (Rusty Metoyer); 'Zydeco Sont Pas Sale' (Clifton Chenier); 'Hot Tamale Baby' (Clifton Chenier); 'Cookin in the Kitchen' (Keith Frank); 'Zydeo Gumbo' (Brian Jack).

Zydeco is often described as a 'musical gumbo' and a long discourse has been in place about musical hybridity through the lens of food. Listening to zydeco's whole is listening to all of its parts: the crossings, exchanges and collaborations that went into its making. Much like the 'taste' of gumbo's varied ingredients, the very 'sound' of zydeco is a creolization of musics evoking an entire history of a people. You'll hear a diatonic accordion refrain with French origins, a chord progression from the blues and perhaps a rhythm from Africa via the Caribbean. The frottoir – a corrugated metal vest worn over the shoulders provides constant percussion as it cuts through the bass and accordion lines. It evolved from the scrubboard but was fabricated in the steel plants of Texas. As it rings out it summons a historical entanglement with large industry, petrochemicals and Louisiana Creole migration to eastern Texas. Brandon LaBelle maintains the power of music as a map and historical genesis of a people:

> The seemingly innocent trajectory of sound as it moves from its source and toward a listener, without forgetting all the surfaces, bodies, and other sounds it brushes against, is a story imparting a great deal of information fully charged with geographic, social, psychological, and emotional energy. My feeling is that an entire history and culture can be found within a single sound. (2010: *xvi*)

A piece of music, like a bowl of gumbo, is a textured and multi-layered creation. Both food and music activate similar philosophies around mixing, and this feels especially pertinent in the Americas where disparate elements came together to forge entirely new forms of cultural expression. The musical ingredients of zydeco, much like that of gumbo, tell some of this story. Quarles has noted that 'all societies attach cultural, social, and political significance to their foodways and to their musicking, which are often key factors in creating cohesive social groups. In short, music and food both bring people together and are part of a broader cultural matrix – a "complex whole" – through which people

define their identity' (2018: 3). Significantly though, 'musicking and food-making, as processes, also create shared bodily experience' (*ibid*: 3). As I explored in chapter 2, the materiality of sound can be experienced on a profoundly physical level. It doesn't just go into the ears but can ripple through the entire body and stimulate a range of senses. Likewise, food is not merely consumed but experienced on multiple sensory and relational levels. The mutuality of these shared intersensorial activities connect to shared commensal moments, strong social bonding and as I will explore next, function as nourishment for mind, body and soul.

The name 'zydeco' is derived from the Creole term '*les haricot sont pas sale*' which means 'the beans aren't salty'. Dishes were historically salted with salt meat and if families were too poor to afford salt meat, then they ate unsalted beans. '*Les haricot sont pas sale*' thus refers to not only hard times but the music that helped to endure them. I discuss this history with Queliquia who I catch up with after leaving Al serving his hungry customers. Leaning up against the frame of an empty party wagon she reflects:

> We talking about a time when all they had was scrubboards and literally pots and pans to bang on and in those pots and pans, they found something that was an escape and that's our people, that's what we come from. And so, to define that, and be proud, and correct people on that, that's who we are. That's what Creole is. It's the soul and it's the heart of a culture that is a gumbo pot… You got all kinds of people that this brings together as a whole.[120]

Queliquia acknowledges the divergent roots of the music and the sustenance it has provided for generations before her. The notion of music as spiritual and psychological sanctuary is not a new idea, especially in the context of African American musicways. As I discussed in chapter 3, Josh Kun has described how music can be experienced 'not only as sound that goes into our ears and vibrates through our bones but as a space we can enter into, encounter, move around in, inhabit, be safe in' (2005: 2), thus highlighting how we can understand music as a means of transport and escape. In the background, the chank of Leon Chavis' accordion signals the music is about to start and people start

[120] Queliquia Darden, discussion with author, Cheek TX, April 2022

gathering in front of the stage. Queliquia goes on:

> You are in awe when you hear that bass thumping, you hear that accordion and that zydeco artist closes their eyes and you are feeling everything that they feel and they are giving everything that their grandmother and grandfather taught them. It's the feeling and it makes your soul feel whole and well. There is nothing on earth like this.[121]

Zydeco is described as a kind of food for the soul. The feelings of 'wholeness' and 'wellness' that come about from listening to zydeco is akin to a nourishing meal. Understanding zydeco as part of a wider network of Black Atlantic sonic practices highlights its potential to function as a source of comfort and sustenance (like soul food) in a racially repressive nation. In *Black Metamorphosis*, Sylvia Wynter describes the beats and grooves of Black music as an 'affirmation of black life' (McKittrick 2016: 90). She writes that 'listening to beats, grooves, and music fosters collective "cosmic unity" between the self and the social body: people "listening or dancing participate in the experience of the music and are linked to the physiological experience of the beat"' (as cited in McKittrick 2016: 90). Her work 'allows us to think about how loving and sharing and hearing and listening and grooving to black music is a rebellious political act that is entwined with neurological pleasure' (*ibid*: 81).

As the live music gets into full swing, I join Dionte who has stepped back from the revelry to enjoy a hot bowl of gumbo. Dionte has been in charge of safety on the ride that day which meant making sure the procession stayed on one side of the road and helping direct any oncoming traffic, all of which he'd done on horseback. As he eats, we watch the unfolding party in front of us and he talks passionately about the significance of zydeco and trail riding:

> There's a lot of people and neighbourhoods that have shunned us. They don't want us to have fun. But this, this is our culture. This is something that we've built. This is a foundation. Our ancestors started this. This is our blood. It pumps through us. We feel it every time we step. This is our centre. This is our gravity. So, we have to be one with what we cultivate.[122]

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[121] Queliquia Darden, discussion with author, Cheek TX, April 2022
[122] Dionte Guillory, discussion with author, Cheek TX, April 2022

Dionte finishes the gumbo and lights a cigarette. The light has faded enough by this point to catch the flash of neon wristbands in amongst some of the dancers. Beyond the stage, there is a bar where some of the Texas Regulators, in matching green t-shirts, are serving up their 'roux' – a heady cocktail of spirits and fruit juices. A hand-painted sign reading 'remember we are here to have fun' leans up against the bar. He gestures towards the lively scene:

> Look at what we are doing. We are feeding our community. We've been through so much, hell now for many years. Told 'no', that we can't. But look at what we are doing, because we can. It's our God-given right. That's the beautiful thing about zydeco, it brings all different elements together.[123]

CONCLUSION

As coequal constituent elements of both Creole identity and sociality, food and music are inextricably linked in Southwest Louisiana. Food is an important part of every trail ride, with families taking time and care to prepare dishes like gumbo or BBQ to share amongst family and friends after a day of horse riding and dancing. In this chapter, I have shown how sharing and generosity are 'organising values' for Creole trail riders, invoking the region's long tradition of *boucheries* which played an important role in supporting rural life at the community level. Rich webs of meaning are associated with food and edible exchange, helping us to think beyond food's nutritional value and contemplate the thick network of relationships it can create and sustain.

Eating together is a vital means of social integration, an activity where relationships are performed and communities are shaped. Through the concept of 'commensality', I highlighted how sharing food fosters kinship, connects to ancestral knowledge and functions as a platform for social good. Being part of Trail Ride Nation is continually cultivated and maintained through networks of sharing and these networks have become a tenet of trail ride ethos and mentality. I then considered the long history of African American mutual aid societies in Louisiana and the role they have played in

[123] Dionte Guillory, discussion with author, Cheek TX, April 2022

providing imperative support for families across the region. This civic-minded care endures today and I showed how through community meals, college scholarships and medical fundraisers, trail riding functions as a contemporary site of community organized support and aid in a region beset with dismal poverty statistics and extortionate healthcare. Trail Ride Nation serves as a site with a political dimension as it creates an alternate space that seeks to remedy the ills of contemporary American society. This is further discussed towards the end of the chapter as I highlight the long relationship between food and music in Southwest Louisiana, illustrating the nourishing spatial possibilities of zydeco music.

The history of mutual aid in the Americas has its roots in the violent matrix of the transatlantic slave trade and plantocratic life. I attended to this complex history through the lens of gumbo – a defining dish of Louisiana and trail ride culinary mainstay. Discussing the creolized history of the dish, I explored how edible entanglements became a means of both survival and resistance for the enslaved. What it is to be 'Creole' arguably emerged from the matrix of slavery, plantations, racism but has flourished in the reciprocal economies of mutual aid and relational entanglements with nonhuman animals and materialities. I also discussed how food is a complex and unstable realm. In light of the negative health ramifications of excessive meat consumption, we can understand meat as not the inert or neutral object acted upon by human consumers but an 'unpredictable agent in ever more complex networks of human and non-human beings' (Staples and Klein 2017: 194). Finally, this chapter has considered how *creolization* is not just a linguistic concept or terminology to describe musical or food-based mixing in the Americas, but a technology for imagining multiple domains, entities and beings in tandem.

Conclusion

> Opacities can coexist, converge, weaving kinds of fabric whose true meaning would be related to the interweaving of this weft and not to the nature of its component threads.
>
> Édouard Glissant (as cited in Vergès 2015: 38)

The various ethnographic stories I share in this thesis demonstrate entangled ways of life at zydeco trail rides in Southwest Louisiana. In light of their ephemeral and mobile nature, trail rides offer a unique opportunity to consider the power of human entanglements with non-human animals and materialities and the impact these entanglements have on social becoming. Whether riding horses, dancing to music, dressing as a group or eating together, I have attended to how encounters with non-human elements can encourage solidarity and foster the kind of dynamic and changing common world that emerges by way of sonic, sartorial and edible expressions. Unpacking the embodied and emotional experiences of the trail ride through the lens of these entangled relationships, I also demonstrated how they are reinscribed, subverted and celebrated through zydeco music. Attentive to the complex racial history in South Louisiana, I considered how these Creole entanglements connect to the concept of 'creolization' as a process of 'creation, invention, critique, and resistance' (Cohen and Toninato 2010: 14) and demonstrated the ways Creole entanglements have become tools for self-making and reinvention against the region's historical backdrop of racial segregation.

As subversive political tools, I have understood the entanglements addressed in this thesis as 'counter-hegemonic in their challenge to cultural dominance, making creolity nothing but revolutionary' (Baron and Cara 2003: 5). Creolization is an outcome of 'racialized living together which goes beyond racial coding through the contact of different affects, desires, energies and intensities that break the established normative order of the governance of diversity' (Roderíguez and Tate 2015: 6). I augmented the idea that creolization is a racial project and that, in my understanding, creolization indexes social relationships that include, but are not reducible to race. I have endeavored to show Trail Ride Nation as a 'complex manifestation of hybridity' (LaBelle 2018: 97), where *becoming* is contingent on the creative and powerful mingling of human, animal, sonic, sartorial and

edible agents.

Whilst the four chapters in this thesis are themselves entangled in multiple disciplinary ways, they are primarily connected through discussions of creolization, music and race. This thesis endeavored to show how Creole entanglements align and link, to create an assemblage of sensory bodies in cohesion with one another. With a focus on bodily engagements and tactile encounters, chapter one demonstrated the thick network that entangles humans and horses as citizenry of Trail Ride Nation. Deep bonds are formed between trail riders and their horses through embodied relations and notions of 'being at one with' can make the human-horse relationship both extrasensory and also transcendent. This chapter drew attention to the 'felt' dimensions of the trail ride through engaged muscles and tactile communications between human and rider. Tactility and notions of corporeal engagement were revisited in chapter two, but in relation to sound. Part mobile festival and part dance party, amplified music plays an integral part in constructing trail rides of Southwest Louisiana and Eastern Texas. Opening the chapter with an introduction to Breadman and his zydeco bread truck, I explored how Trail Ride Nation is dynamically and extrinsically constituted through the vibrations of sounding. With sonically dominant bass lines, the zydeco trail ride is far more than an auditory experience as it assaults and stimulates a range of bodily senses. Taking account of the rise of zydeco's 'low end', I used Henrique's notion of 'sonic dominance' (2008) and Merleau Ponty's ideas on *reversibility* to draw out the sensual dimensions of the sonic experience and consider how music 'on the move' creates a material setting for celebration, groove and belonging. Following Eidsheim (2015), LaBelle (2018) and Bennett (2010), I understood sound in the trail ride setting as a shifting and energetic vibration and a transferrable energy, in its capacity to enable an 'animate flow to pass between bodies and things' (Labelle 2018).

Trail ride bodies are not just engaged and animated through the sonic but also through the sartorial. In chapter three I explored how clothing is experienced as a tactile materiality that also engages sight. Following Gilroy's understanding that 'master signifiers of black creativity, sound, have been supplanted by eyes and visuality' as ways of seeing and being seen (1995: 29), I demonstrated how clothing and style have become cultural instruments of self-making and community cohesiveness. Whether through bright matching group t-shirts, exotic boots or saggy jeans, the adorned body is a

strong visual element at the trail ride that communicates group membership and celebrates a range of creolized identities (amongst riders and musicians alike) that continually respond to broader popularized aesthetics. The collective trail ride body is also celebrated and sustained through edible entanglements. As key cultural signifiers for Creoles in South Louisiana, food and music are never found far from each other. At trail rides across the region, zydeco rings out as gumbos boil in black pots or pork steaks sizzle on BBQs, stimulating the entire range of senses. Chapter four brought food into focus as I discussed historic and contemporary networks of sharing and exchange, along with their powerful impact on social becoming.

All the Creole entanglements discussed in this thesis have been shown to engage the mind and body in a variety of ways. There is an endless interconnection of sensory experience that is engaged by way of equine, sonic, sartorial and edible interactions. Experienced collectively, they can all be understood to foster fellowship in the trail ride setting and as I explored, reveal intergenerational tensions and points of competiveness. As I will now go on to consider, these entanglements also offer modes of creative agency as they become sites of racialization and resistance. If we understand race as a visual issue, race as 'a matter of looking' (Smith 2014: 2), in chapter one I demonstrated how trail riders have been produced as racialized subjects through the gaze of some white observers and highlighted how American equestrian technologies have been cultivated as a space and activity for the white. In line with Giancarlo (2017), I maintained Creole trail riding has become a powerful 'counter-mobility' that symbolises an action of Black resistance and self-determination as participants move freely through the countryside in all their visual and sonic glory. Hybrid, creole relationships between humans and historic plantation horses are transformed into musicking sites of anti-racism and pleasure. Race as an 'audible' issue is called to attention in chapter two as I addressed the 'heard' implications of trail ride vibrations and the 'earthly' impact of their collective assemblage. In line with McKittrick's understandings of Black music (2016), I considered trail riding's sonic dominance as a 'rebellious' wave form that interrupts the earth and as a powerful act of 'registering and projecting a collective presence though sound' (Wald 2011) in spaces with difficult plantocratic histories. The cancellation of Lake Charles' Creole Mardi Gras parade showed how African American cultural practices with sound and music have come under racial scrutiny. With reference to Stoever's

(2016) concept of the *'*sonic color line', I examined how *listening* has become a racialized body discipline. The sonic colour line codifies sounds linked to racialized bodies – such as music or everyday life – as 'noise', 'sound's loud and unruly "Other"' (2016: 12).

I returned to race as a 'visual' issue in chapter three when I discussed sartorial entanglements and the politics of adornment. I discussed some of the racialized narratives that have accompanied Western wear and hip hop or 'urban wear'. The furore around 'rapper' Lil Nas X dressing in Western wear and zydeco 'folk' musician Chris Ardoin in saggy jeans provided an opportunity to consider the long history of Black dress practices in the US and the ways Black stylistic resistance has confronted demands for conformity from authorities. Both examples resist binary representations and limited depictions of Black life. Chapter three demonstrated how the sartorial expression of zydeco musicians and trail riders remains a potent affirmation of self and a nexus of fashion, music and racial politics. Finally, chapter four looked at historic modes of resistance and how relationships with food (in connection with mutual aid), form a civic-minded and grass roots support network that resists the ills of a racially repressive nation.

Creole worlds are by their very nature a nascent alloy of backgrounds, bearing the mark of the violent history of African enslavement, as well as the colonial powers that oversaw it. Trail Ride Nation is marked by a continual evolution, absorbing new trends and adapting to a shifting cultural landscape. This dynamism of identity is a distinguishing feature of Creole enactments and, as the entanglements discussed in this thesis demonstrate, an expression of resistance to categorisation. More than that, it indicates a willingness to embrace a multitude of diverse backgrounds.

RESEARCH HORIZONS

The four chapters in this thesis are connected through discussions of music, race and creolization and in the context of Southwest Louisiana, these discourses are continually evolving and responding to one another. There are multiple potential horizons for this research. One such a horizon would be a deeper analysis of gendered subjectivities in the trail ride environment. Whilst women made up a good percentage of my participants, I lacked the scope to more fully unpack the intersection of

gender, race and entanglements with the non-human elements discussed in each of these chapters.

Internet mediated culture is another Creole entanglement that is relevant for trail riders. Social media remains a key platform for promoting forthcoming trail rides and sharing photos from past events. Participants also often live-stream trail rides to Facebook or Instagram as they groove on party wagons or ride along on horseback. Whilst live-streaming invites remote participants to temporarily synchronise with the live trail ride event, future research could look at how the internet facilitates or inhibits shared culture. Can the feelings of collective joy and solidarity fostered in the trail ride environment be experienced remotely? And to what extent do those doing the live-streaming become removed from the embodied immediacy of the trail ride if they are busy looking at their phone screens?

South Louisiana is a landscape full of agentive forces and caught in an endless cycle of disaster and recovery. Changing climate and increasingly unpredictable weather systems have repeatedly wreaked havoc across the region and as I write this, neighbouring Florida is reeling from the devastation of Hurricane Ian. A collection of decaying FEMA trailers, brought in for those displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, still litter a stretch of the I-49 interstate between the cities of Lafayette and Opelousas, serving as a timely reminder of the unstable environment. They also serve as a reminder of the federal government's slow response to provide aid for many residents of New Orleans who remained without clean water, food or shelter for days after the hurricane had passed. During this period, community-based mutual aid networks stepped in to provide vital emergency assistance. After Katrina, 400,000 residents (nearly the entire city) were displaced, the majority of them relocated across Texas and other areas of Louisiana, almost half of them never to return to New Orleans (Bliss 2015). In more recent years, the people of Isle de Jean Charles have become Louisiana's first climate refugees as rising sea levels engulf their coastal land. As multiple communities merge and shift in the face of accelerating environmental stressors, future research might also consider how internal displacement and resettlement impacts established cultural practices such as zydeco trail rides and further contributes to understandings of creolization and networks of mutual aid.

Notes

LIST OF CITED AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

INTRODUCTION

Queliquia Darden, female, 30s, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.

Ashley Lewis, female, 30s, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.

CHAPTER 1

Raymond ‘Boyo’ Silvester, male, 40s, discussion with author, Opelousas LA, May 2019

Shane Boagni, male, 40s, interview by author, Opelousas LA, June 2019

Patrick, male, 40s, discussion with author, Henderson LA, March 2019.

JB, male, 20s, discussion with author, Leonville LA, April 2019

Mavv, male, 20s, discussion with author, Abbeville LA, April 2019.

Destiny, female, 20s, Instagram messaging with author, July 2019.

Alton ‘Billy’ Francis, male, 60s, interview by author, Parks LA, March 2019.

Raymond ‘Boyo’ Silvester, male, 40s, interview by author, Lafayette LA, October 2019

Jayda, female, 40s, discussion with author, Parks LA, October 2019

Jarvis Bowie, male, 30s, discussion with author, Woodworth LA October 2019

Jarvis Bowie, male, 30s, discussion with author, Leonville LA, July 2019.

Reggie, male, 50s, discussion with author, Baker, LA April 2019.

CHAPTER 2

Frank ‘Breadman’ Malbrough, male, 80s, interview by author, Church Point LA, July 2020

Chucky Bush, male, 60s, interview by author, Lafayette LA, March 2019

Herman Fusilier, male, 50s, interview by author, St Landry Parish, September 2019.

Sean Ardoin, male, 40s, interview by author, Lake Charles LA, September 2019

Ashley Lewis, female, 30s, interview with author, Church Point LA, April 2019

Shane Boagni, male, 30s, interview by author, Opelousas LA, June 2019

Ashley Lewis, female, 30s, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019

Chris, male, 30s, discussion with author, Woodworth LA, October 2019

Raymond ‘Boyo’ Silvester, male, 40s, interview by author, Lafayette LA, October 2019

Chris Ardoin, male, 30s, Facebook live stream, January 2019

Queliquia Darden, female, 30s, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.

CHAPTER 3

Ashley Lewis, female, 30s, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.

Shane Boagni, male, 30s, interview by author, Opelousas LA, June 2019

Queliquia Darden, female, 30s, interview by author, Beaumont TX, November 2019.

Raymond ‘Boyo’ Silvester, male, 40s, interview by author, Lafayette LA, October 2019

Alton ‘Billy’ Francis, male, 60s, interview by author, Parks LA, November 2019.

Shavar Francis, male, 20s, discussion with author, Parks LA, November 2019.

Ashley Lewis, female, 30s, in email to author, November 2021

Jarvis Bowie, male, 30s, discussion with author, June 2019

Leon Chavis, male, 30s, interview with author, August 2019

Bruce, male, 40s, discussion with author, June 2019

Raymond ‘Boyo’ Silvester, male, 40s, discussion with author, Opelousas LA, November 2019

CHAPTER 4

Shane Boagni, male, 30s, discussion with author, Opelousas LA, July 2019

Lance, male, 30s, discussion with author, Cheek TX, April 2019

Alcide Lewis, male, 60s, discussion with author, Cheek TX, April 2022

Jarvis Bowie, male, 30s, discussion with author, Leonville LA, June 2019

Dionte Guillory, male, 30s, discussion with author, Cheek TX, April 2022

Queliquia Darden, female, 30s, discussion with author, Cheek TX, April 2022

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Appendix

Consent and Ethics

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Zydeco Beats and Dancing Horses: Identity, rhythm and non-human actors at Creole trail rides in Southwest Louisiana

Ethics Approval Reference: R61611/RE001

In light of your experience and expertise in the field of trail riding and / or zydeco music, I am writing to invite you to participate in this doctoral research: "Zydeco Beats and Dancing Horses: Identity, rhythm and non-human actors at Creole trail rides in Southwest Louisiana"**.** The research is conducted by Gwendolen von Einsiedel, a doctoral candidate in Ethnomusicology at the University of Oxford and it is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

This research explores the importance of trail riding and zydeco to the Creole community in Southwest Louisiana. By conducting extended fieldwork in the region, this research will investigate how the relationship between humans and horses has played a role in the creation of a distinctive musical landscape and regional ethnic identity.

If you would like to participate, you will be invited for an interview at a mutually agreed time and public place with me, Gwendolen von Einsiedel. Upon arrival, I will talk you through the study procedures and give you the chance to ask any questions. If you are still happy to take part, you will then be asked to sign a consent form. Your interview will last anything between 40 to 90 minutes. If you are happy for the interview to be recorded you will be asked for specific consent. All the research data will be stored confidentially using password protected, encrypted devices.

If you are interested in taking part and would like more information then please do not hesitate to contact me via the information at the top of the page. You can also contact my academic supervisor Professor Jason Stanyek at Jason.stanyek@music.ox.ac.uk or +441865276125

Thank you for your consideration!

Gwendolen von Einsiedel
Doctoral Candidate in Ethnomusicology
Faculty of Music
University of Oxford

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Zydeco Beats and Dancing Horses: Identity, rhythm and non-human actors at Creole trail rides in Southwest Louisiana

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Ethics Approval Reference: R61611/RE001

1. *What is the purpose of this research?*

The focus of this doctoral research is to explore the importance of zydeco and trail riding to Creole identity in Southwest Louisiana. By conducting extended fieldwork in the region, this research will investigate how the relationship between humans and horses has played a role in the creation of a distinctive musical landscape and regional ethnic identity. This study hopes to answer the following questions –

How have trail riders utilized nouveau zydeco to reimagine their rural identity?

To what extent are horses entangled in the realm of nouveau zydeco?

In what ways do trail rides allow participants to assert a sense of Creole identity?

2. *Why have I been invited to take part?*

You are receiving this letter of information in light of your experience and expertise in the field of trail riding and / or zydeco music.

3. *Do I have to take part?*

No. You can ask questions about the research before deciding whether or not to participate. If you do agree to participate, you may change your anonymity preferences or withdraw yourself from the study without giving a reason, by advising the researcher of this decision. The date until which you can easily withdraw any information you have given is December 2021.

4. *What will happen to me if I take part in the research?*

If you are happy to take part in the research, your participation will involve an interview with the researcher at a mutually convenient time and in a public place such as a coffee shop, library or trail ride.

Upon arrival, the researcher will talk you through the study procedures and give you the chance to ask any questions. This should take approximately 10 minutes.

If you are still happy to take part, you will then be asked to sign a consent form.

Your interview will last anything between 40 to 90 minutes. If you are happy for the interview to be recorded (either audio or video) you will be asked for specific consent. The

recordings may be edited and submitted on CD/DVD as supplementary accompaniment to the researcher's final thesis. The researcher may also want to take your photograph for the final thesis. You will be asked for specific consent before this happens and it is entirely optional.

5. ***Are there any potential risks in taking part?***

Although risks are minimal, specific topics of conversation, depending on your own experience, may be upsetting and if so, we encourage you to withdraw from the interview.

6. ***Are there any benefits in taking part?***

There will be no direct benefit to you from taking part in this research.

7. ***What happens to the data provided?***

The information you provide as part of the study is the **research data**. Any research data from which you can be identified (eg. your name, date of birth, audio recording), is known as **personal data**. If applicable to the study: this includes more sensitive categories of personal data (**sensitive data**) such as your racial or ethnic origin. It does not include data where the identity has been removed (**anonymous data**).

We will minimise our use of personal and sensitive data in the study as much as possible.

The **research data** will be stored confidentially using password protected, encrypted devices.

Please note that your responses will **not** be anonymised unless you request this.

Personal / sensitive data will be stored confidentially using password protected, encrypted devices.

Only the researcher will have access to personal / sensitive / research data.

We would like your permission to use direct quotes.

All research data and records will be stored for at least 3 years after publication or public release of the work of the research. We may retain and store your personal data for an additional period of time as necessary for the purposes of the study, and for further research.

8. ***Will the research be published?***

The research will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be openly accessible.

The University of Oxford is committed to the dissemination of its research for the benefit of society and the economy and, in support of this commitment, has established an online archive of research

materials. This archive includes digital copies of student theses successfully submitted as part of a University of Oxford postgraduate degree programme. Holding the archive online gives easy access for researchers to the full text of freely available theses, thereby increasing the likely impact and use of that research.

9. *Who is organising and funding the research?*

The research is being organised by the principal researcher and research student.
The Arts and Humanities Research Council will be funding the research along with a small financial contribution from the New Orleans Centre for South Gulf studies at the University of Tulane.

10. *Who has reviewed this study?*

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee R61611/RE001

11. *Who do I contact if I have a concern about the study or I wish to complain?*

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please speak to the relevant researcher +44 7815753739 or their supervisor +44 1865 276125, who will do their best to answer your query. The researcher should acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how they intend to deal with it. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the relevant chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter in a reasonably expeditious manner:

Chair, **Social Sciences & Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee**; Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD

12. *Data Protection*

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest.
Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/compliance/gdpr/individualrights/.

13. *Further Information and Contact Details*

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Jason Stanyek
Faculty of Music
St Aldates, Oxford OX1 1DB
Jason.stanyek@music.ox.ac.uk
Oxford telephone number: 01865 276125

CONSENT FORM

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

CUREC Approval Reference: R61611/RE001

Zydeco Beats and Dancing Horses:Trail Ride Nation: Zydeco, Race and Horses in Southwest Louisiana.

Purpose of Study: To explore the relationship between zydeco music and trail riding and further understand what impact this has on Creole identity.

		Please initial each box
1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or academic penalty.	☐
3	I understand that research data collected during the study may be looked at by designated individuals from the University of Oxford where it is relevant to my taking part in this study. I give permission for these individuals to access my data.	☐
4	I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.	☐
5	I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐
6	I understand how this research will be written up and published.	☐
7	I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	☐
8	Optional: I consent to being audio recorded	☐
9	Optional: I consent to being video recorded	☐
10	Optional: I consent to having my photo taken	☐
11	I understand how audio recordings / videos / photos will be used in research outputs	☐
12a	Optional: I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication against my name **OR**	☐

12b	Optional: I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication, but not against my name	☐
13	I agree for my personal data to be kept in a secure database for the purpose of contacting me about future studies.	☐

Name of Participant	Date	Signature

Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL FORM (CUREC 1A)

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD
Tel: +44(0)1865 616576 Fax: +44(0)1865 280467
ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk

4 January 2019

Miss Gwendolen von Einsiedel
Music Faculty
University of Oxford

Dear Miss von Einsiedel,

Research Ethics Approval (CUREC 1A)
Ref No: R61611/RE001

Title: Zydeco Beats and Dancing Horses: Identity, rhythm and non-human actors at Creole trail rides in Southwest Louisiana.

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (IDREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to the IDREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly approval has been granted.

Should there be any subsequent changes to the project, which raise ethical issues not covered in the original application, you should submit details to the IDREC for consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Claudia Kozeny-Pelling
Research Ethics Manager and Secretary SSH IDREC

cc: Professor Jason Stanyek; academic.admin@music.ox.ac.uk