



XAVIER
UNIVERSITY of LOUISIANA

Xavier University of Louisiana
XULA Digital Commons

Programming for Mystery in Motion

African American Mardi Gras Maskers' Covid
Pandemic Experiences and Ideas about "the
Good Life"

2-14-2021

Opening Blessing of "Mystery in Motion"

Kim Vaz-Deville

Xavier University of Louisiana, kvaz@xula.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.xula.edu/xula_tgl_mim_program



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vaz-Deville, Kim, "Opening Blessing of "Mystery in Motion"" (2021). *Programming for Mystery in Motion*. 4. https://digitalcommons.xula.edu/xula_tgl_mim_program/4

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the African American Mardi Gras Maskers' Covid Pandemic Experiences and Ideas about "the Good Life" at XULA Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Programming for Mystery in Motion by an authorized administrator of XULA Digital Commons. For more information, please contact ksiddell@xula.edu.

Opening Blessing of "Mystery in Motion"

Event Date: Sunday, February 14, 2021

In celebration of the opening of Mystery in Motion, join us for a virtual introduction and blessing of the exhibition. Guest curators Kim Vaz-Deville and Ron Bechet will lead a brief introduction followed by a blessing from Nana Sula Spirit, a Medicine Queen with the Spirit of Fi Yi Yi and the Mandingo Warriors and Priestess of Mami Wata at the Temple of Light - Ile' de Coin-Coin in New Orleans, The Divine Prince Ty Emmecca am the Authentic Elegun Oloye Hoodoo Obeah Bokor and Big Chief of the Black Hawk Voodoo Black Masking Indians, and a prayer from Dr. Ansel Augustine, executive director of Cultural Diversity and Outreach for the Archdiocese of Washington and a member of the Wild Tchoupitoulas, Black Masking Indians.

About the Exhibition

Color, sound, and energy fill the streets on Mardi Gras. African Americans have long used this annual ritual to express Black spiritual traditions. "A lot of what takes place for me on that day is almost like an out-of-body experience," says Big Chief Shaka Zulu of the Golden Feather Hunters. Spiritual themes drawn from African, Islamic, Native American, and European systems of belief are the focus of this exhibition on African American masking traditions, including Mardi Gras Indians, Baby Dolls, and skeletons.

Mardi Gras Indians constitute one of the most vibrant carnival practices in New Orleans. African American men, women, and children adorn themselves with hand-sewn creations of feathers, beads, rhinestones, sequins, and other materials. In tribes, or gangs, they roam their neighborhoods, far removed from parades and tourists. There, they encounter skeletons and Baby Dolls, both reviving a practice that dates back more than a century. Maskers in skeleton suits and papier-mâché skull heads—most prominently represented today by the North Side Skull and Bones Gang—are out and about by dawn, awakening revelers with warnings to "get your life right." Baby Dolls follow in the footsteps of African American working-class women who defied social norms in baby-doll costumes beginning in the 1910s. This Mardi Gras tradition thrived for decades but faded in the late twentieth century, only to be resuscitated in recent years. Today, Black masking Indians, skeletons, and Baby Dolls, along with individual maskers and traditional krewes Oshun and Nefertiti, all incorporate spiritual themes from a variety of sources, creating a profound ritual grounded in community and shared experience.

Guest curators Kim Vaz-Deville and Ron Bechet of Xavier University of Louisiana bring this topic to life through the presentation of more than two dozen suits, costumes, and masking components juxtaposed with African artifacts on loan from Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac of Paris and Southern University at New Orleans. The exhibition will also feature several dozen photographs, video projections, and video stations showing interviews with culture bearers.